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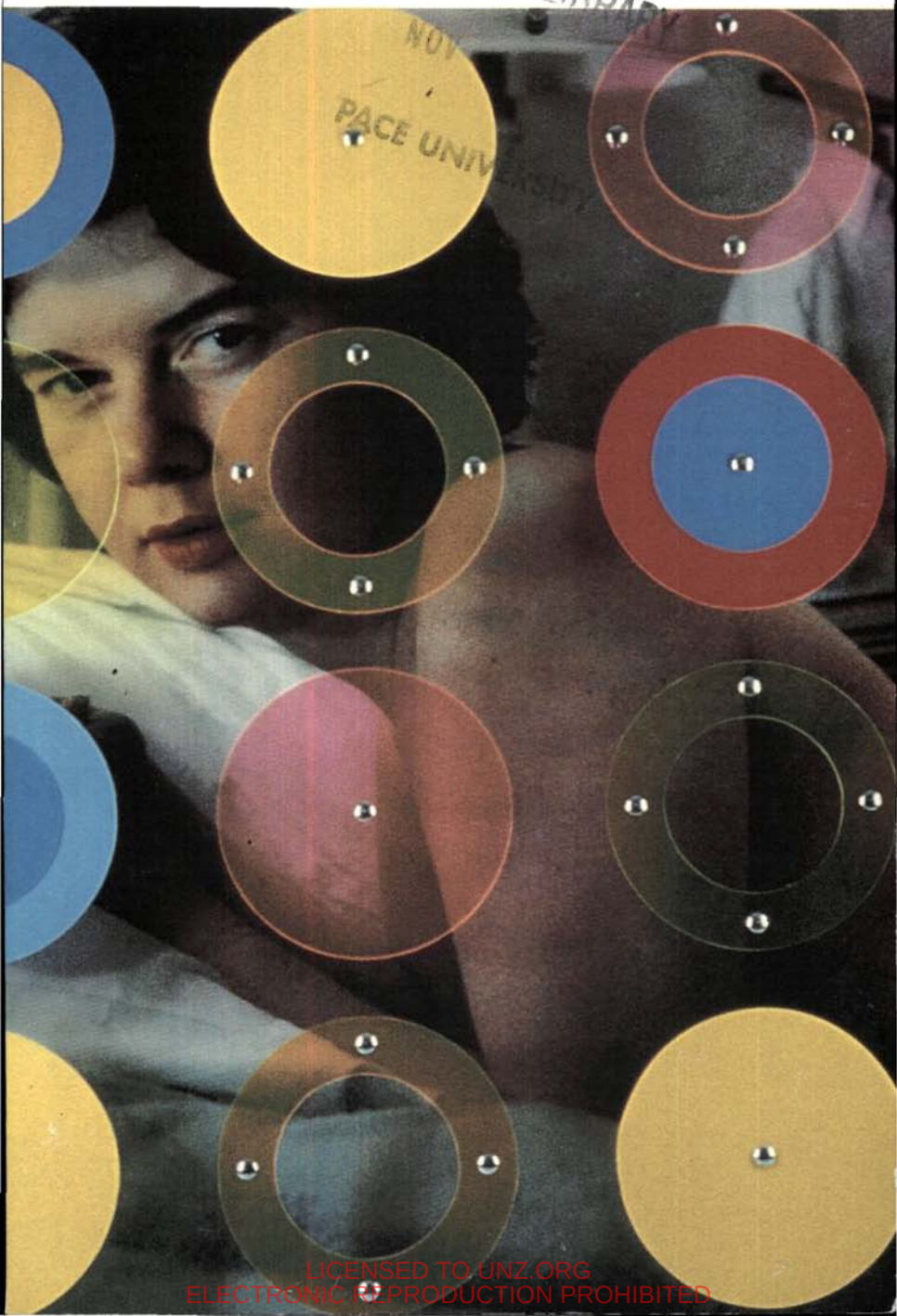

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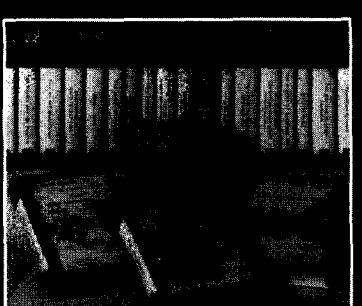

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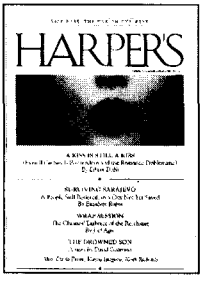

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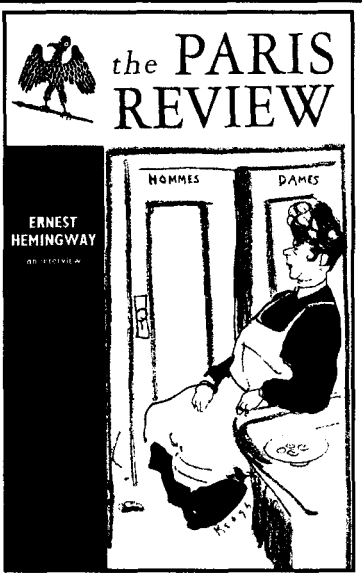

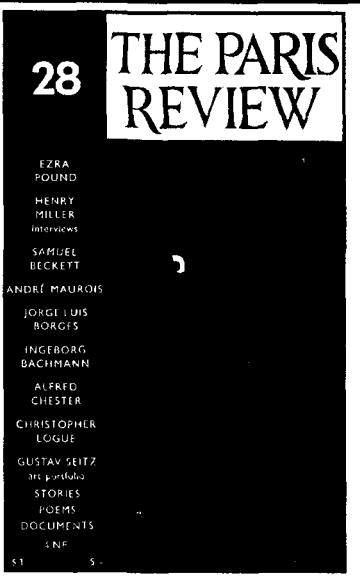

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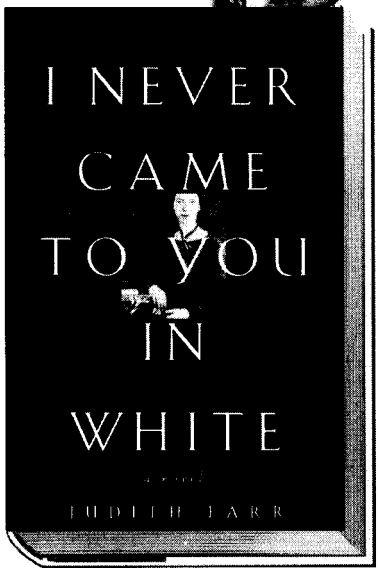

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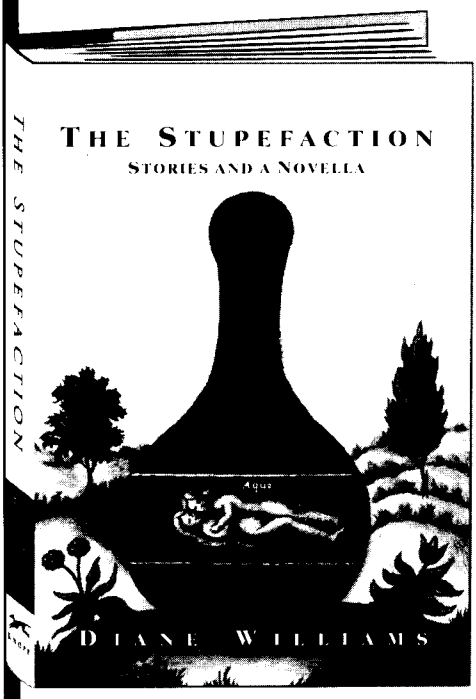

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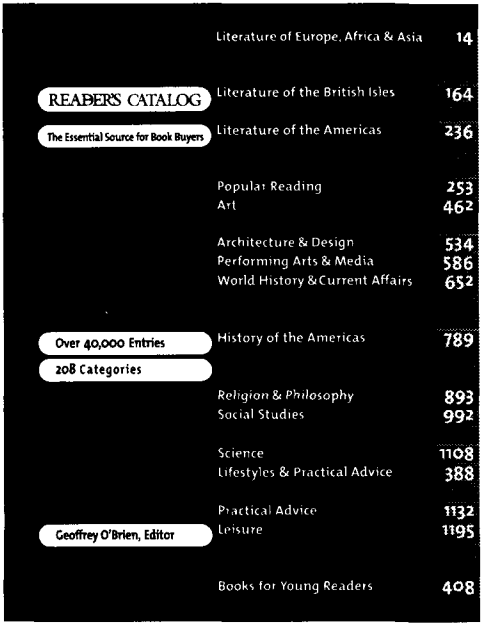
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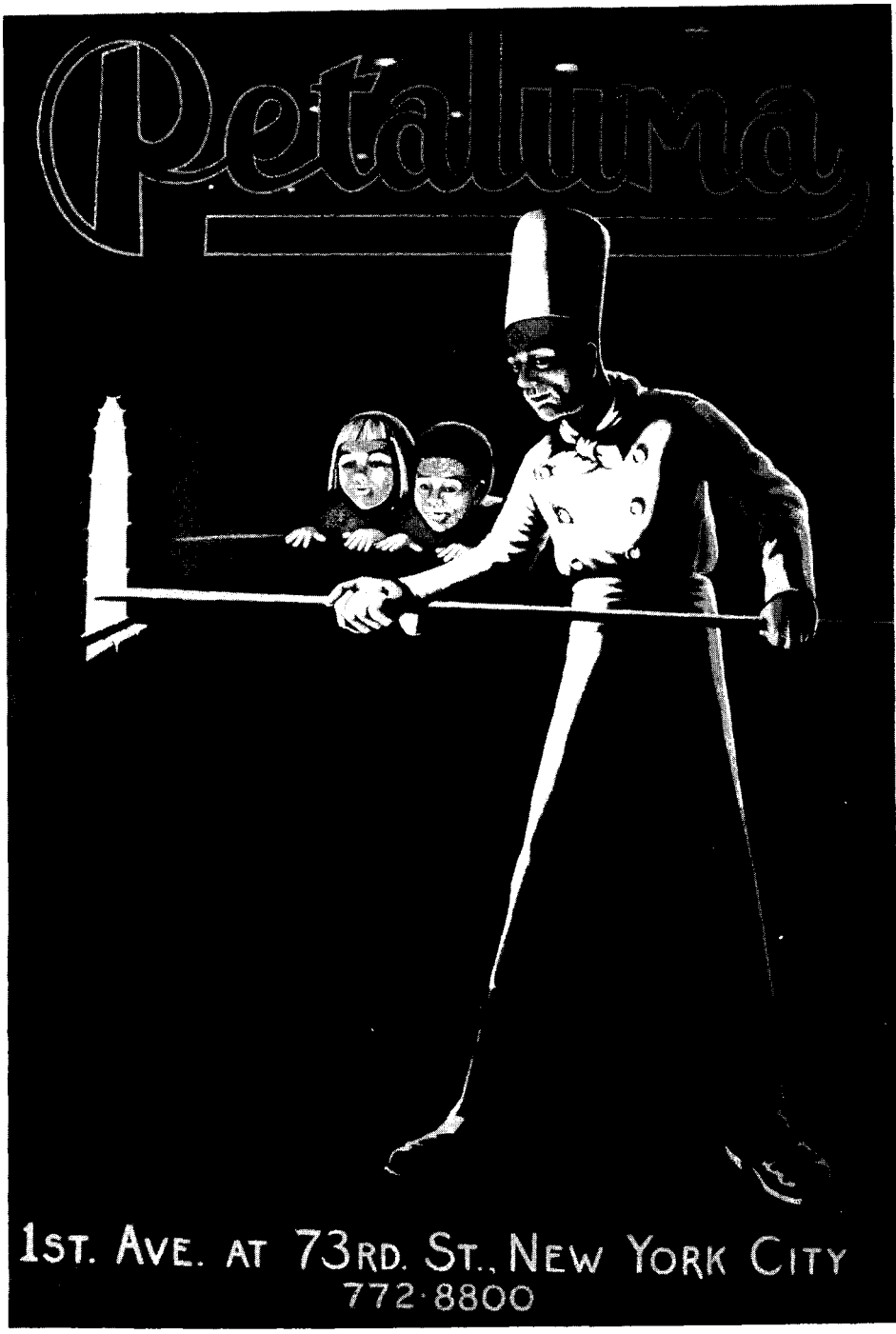

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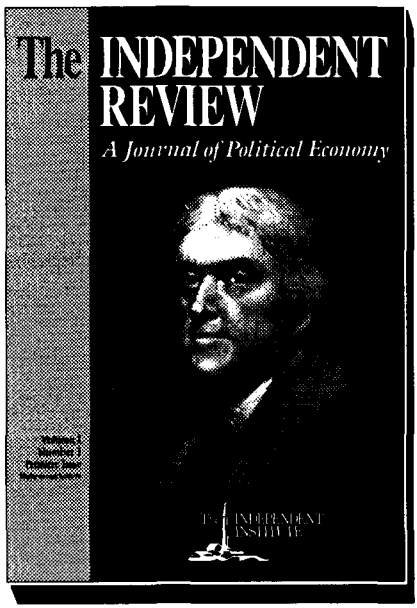

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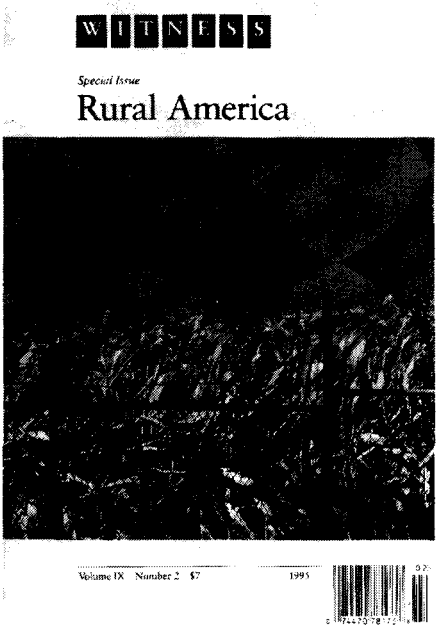

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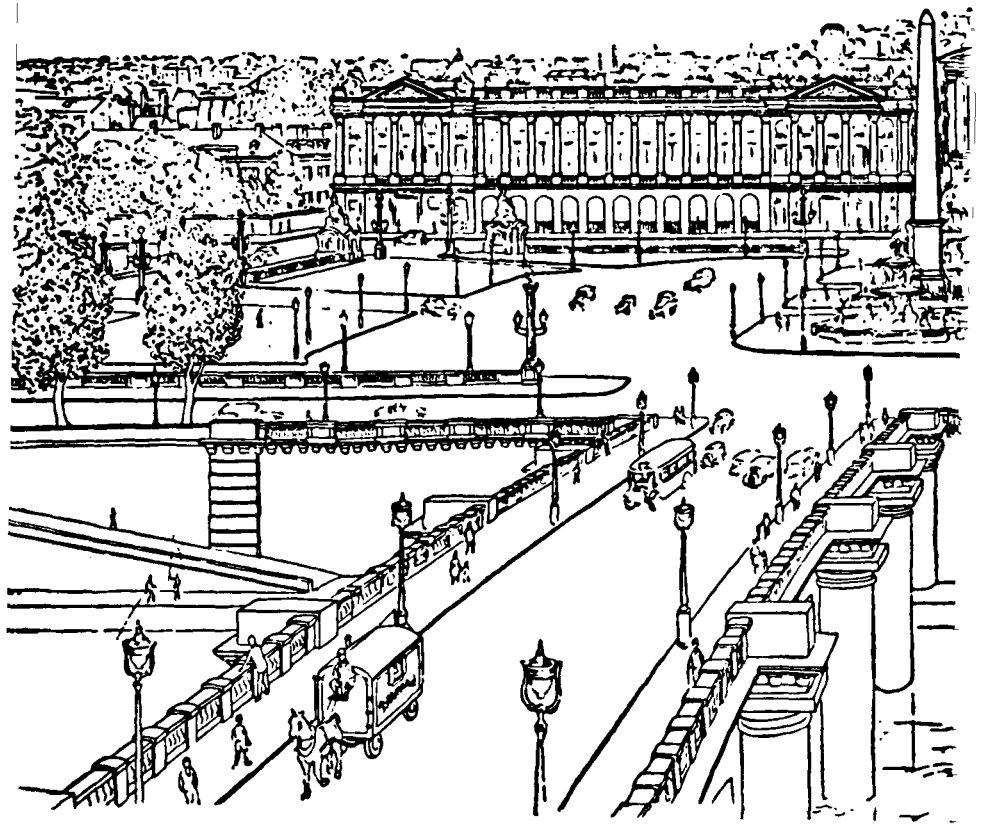

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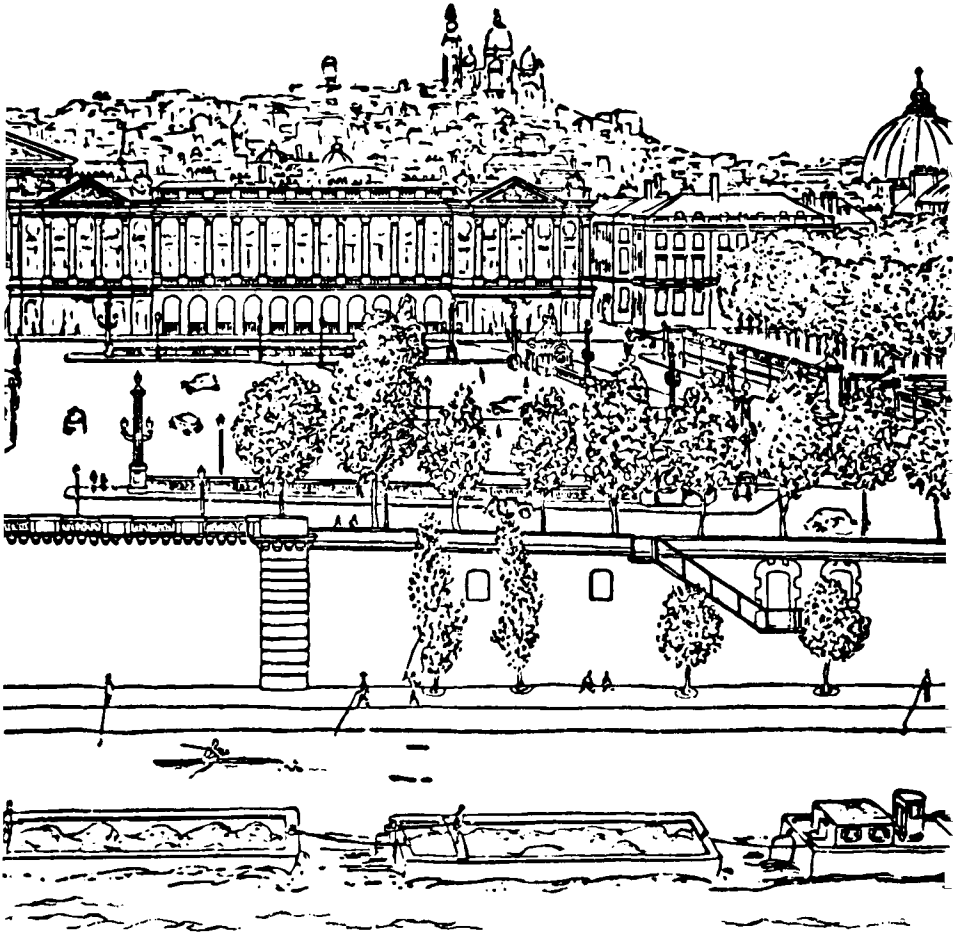

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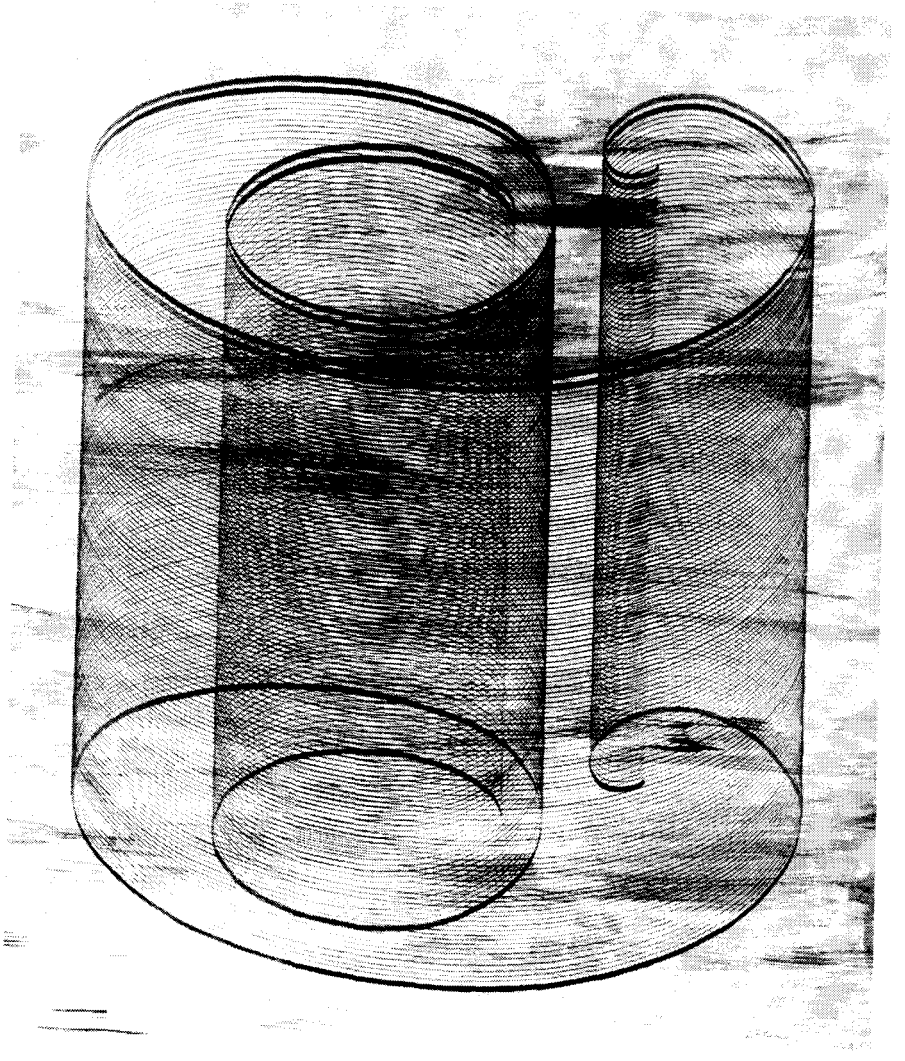

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A Real Disaster

Rhidian Brook

The disaster was great for me and Scud. We were given time off school to help clear up the beaches. Not that we did much. There were experts fixing the birds. And there were men in orange suits spraying the sea with chemicals. Everyone in the town wanted to do something but no one could really do anything. There were some people standing around just crying. Old Bill Western from the market was crying—me and Scud saw him with snot at the end of his nose, muttering "the birds, the birds" to himself like a poem.

Everywhere you looked there was oil and people in plastic suits. It was like the high season and for us and it was all excitement. "Let's get oil on our shoes and leave trails through the streets," we said; "Let's go into Seaview Gifts and mess up Phellp's carpet;" but they wouldn't let us on the beach.

The oil was good for Da, too. It gave him something to do. They needed volunteers up at the estuary for a week's work, and he went up there to help; he packed his case and

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put on his galoshes and oilskins and he looked like he was going to war or something.

"I'm not sure what I can do, but at least I can do something," he said, and I was dead proud of him even though it wasn't a real job.

When he was gone my mother was like a different person. She smiled and put on extra makeup and she gave me money to get sweets from Bunce's. Me and Scud bought Superchews and then went down to watch the people cleaning up the beach and the birds being loaded into the caskets: they were limp and their eyes were white and they were quiet like they got such a shock that they forgot how to squork—or maybe the oil had got inside their lungs or voice box or whatever it is that birds have.

It was bad for them—the birds that is—but when that slick came to town things got better for me, and the black mood lifted off our house; I could time it to the day that Da went to the estuary. The shouting and swearing stopped then. According to Mam, Da had these black moods although how she saw what colour they were I'm not sure. But sometimes the mood got so bad that we all had to tread slowly around the house like we were walking in mud bog. But with Da gone for a week my mother cheered up and there was a holiday atmosphere.

Me and Scud went looking for the BBC and the newspaper men. We decided that we would give interviews and if they asked us we would say that the disaster was great for pocket money and parents and it gave our Das something to do. We'd say that it made my mother happy and that we were given time off school and that we felt important what with the town being on the telly. Obviously we would say that we felt bad about the birds and all that oil sticking to their feathers and the slick and everything but like my Mam says you shouldn't go on and on about it.

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Scud found a newsman from London and he told him that they should send us food like they do for the Africans because we wouldn't have a damn thing to eat now because all we ate down here was fish, which was a lie because we ate chips and burgers most of the time and the only fish we had was fish fingers. Scud was annoyed afterwards because the man said he wasn't filming him; and anyway he forgot to tell him that his Da knew that the reason for it was Arabs getting revenge for all the oil we blew up in that war.

Everyone around us was sad but we were happy like clowns. So we went round and laughed and shouted. Everyone was talking about it all the time and their faces were like sad cods and their favourite words were *ruined* and *terrible* and I could see the colour of their moods and like my Mam says they were black.

Chaz Thomas came round to our house. Chaz owned the Royale guest house overlooking the harbor and he wore purple shirts. He always had a tan because in the winter he went to Spain and in the summer he worked here. Chaz came round and he was in the kitchen talking to Mam when I walked in. Chaz was taller than my Da and he had more money than Da but for all that I preferred my Da.

"Da's gone to help the disaster," I told him. "He's living in billets and saving the birds."

"Hope he can save my bookings," Chaz said. "I've had three cancellations."

Chaz had one of his shirts on and he gave off this smell like our bath after Mam had been in it.

I was thinking that if he was so worried why wasn't he up in the estuary helping out, like Da.

"You should go up to the estuary," I said to him.

"Mr. Thomas has a very important business to run here," my Mam said and I never knew why she called him Mr. Thomas to me when to him she said Chaz in private because I'd overheard them once.

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"Why don't you go and watch telly," my Mam said. "You might see Da." And I thought that was a great idea so I went upstairs.

I watched the news on three channels and the disaster was first on two of them and second on the other but Da wasn't on the news. They showed the estuary and there were thousands of men in suits like they were on the moon and I thought that Da was one of those men.

I saw the town and the estuary and interviews and dead birds and tractors in the sand and birds being washed and looking funny. God I never saw so many birds. It took all that oil to show us all the birds we had living here. After the last news I saw Chaz leaving downstairs and kissing my Mam good-bye.

At night I thought about Da and thought he should get a medal or something for helping out like that. Scud's Da couldn't leave his shop, but Chaz Thomas could have helped if he was so worried about his guests. Da was there now probably up to his neck in oil and holding up a cormorant in one hand and a guillemot in the other and people cheering and saying, "Give him a medal, give him a medal."

Over the next few days things calmed down a bit. There weren't so many people driving to the town to have a gawp at the sea and take photos. The television people left town and on the news they only had the disaster fifth and seventh. Even the papers didn't talk about it, except for locals . . . but I suppose there was more important news what with bombs and the princess and whatnot and you can't bore people with the same old story.

In school Talbot got us to write a story about the disaster. I wrote about Da saving fifty puffins and getting a medal. Miss Evans got us to draw the disaster and we put paint on our hands and made marks on white paper and it looked like oil. Then the headmaster told us to pray that the town would be all right by the summer, and I thought about Chaz's guests but I didn't want to ask God for them. By the end of it all I'd had it up to my head with that blinking oil. It was getting

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into every little conversation and sticking all over people and getting them down like birds and now the teachers were giving us lessons on it.

Mam's cheery mood soon flew off and she was damn moody with me and it was because Da was coming back soon. She went out late one night and Da called and I wasn't sure where Mam was so said she was probably talking to the BBC or something.

Da sounded like a different person on the phone. He sounded happy like his mood had flown off him and he talked and talked like a gull and I thought I was missing out on a great adventure. He said they had rescued two thousand birds or something and that the tanker was bigger than Cardiff Arms Park.

I envied him being up there in the billets saving the world.

Me and Scud stayed cheerful and went down to the harbor and threw stones into the slick which was thick as treacle and moving nowhere like a pond. We tried to skim some flatties but they never bounced they just stuck there then. We walked back and saw a shark but it wasn't it was a seal and it was dead and I felt sick and I thought about Bill Western crying in the street and I wanted to cry myself but I didn't because of Scud. Scud said that that stupid seal should have slid through the oil but he hadn't. Whatever Da was doing up at the estuary it wasn't making things any better, I thought.

I saw a picture of our town in *County Clothes* and the sand was gold and everyone was smiling and I thought it was a different town. Now the slick was stuck there like a black pond, and I thought that if I was a fish I would get out fast and swim to America or Devon. The disaster wasn't on the news anymore although when Da called you'd think it was still more important than the wars in the world and the princess and all the other news that was going on.

Chaz Thomas was round again. He was moaning about his guest house and how it would be a real disaster for him. Mam made him drinks and she kept sighing and saying to me how terrible it was for Mr. Thomas and that he would be ruined.

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Maybe that's why she was being friendly to him, she felt sorry for him and maybe it was a disaster for him but he wasn't a cormorant or a seal and he was still going to Spain for his holiday. I suppose you can kiss someone if you feel sorry for them.

At school Scud said that Chaz Thomas was in love with my Mam and that his brother had seen them together at the Pipe. He wasn't mean when he said it he just told me and he went red. I said that Mam just felt sorry for Chaz Thomas because it was a real disaster for him. I was glad to see Da back. He came in the evening and he looked like the man on top of a mountain smiling and knackered and he was full of tales, he said. I listened to him and I wanted to know it all but Mam sent me upstairs to watch telly and she said she wanted to talk to Da. I thought that maybe she wanted to talk to Da about me or maybe tell him about Chaz's bookings and how upset he was.

The next day at breakfast Mam wasn't around and Da was quiet and his eyes looked like that cormorant I saw all white and staring fearful like he got a shock. Maybe the black mood had come back and I thought I would wash it off if I had the right chemicals and whatnot.

I asked where Mam was and he said she was going to Spain. Then I saw that he was crying and thought that maybe he had seen too many dead birds.

"You did your best, Da, you did your best," I told him.

But he stayed like he couldn't move. I guess that you had to be a grown-up to appreciate a disaster like that.

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Pattiann Rogers

The Art of Raising Gibbons and Flowers

We think they go well together—the translucent
vanilla orchid, the slipper orchid, the ginger
fragrances of the fiddle leaf, the swollen,
juice-filled buds of magnolia grandiflora,
Turkish tulip, Susa crocus, and the siamang
gibbons who pound and scream, quarreling
and sweating, stinking inside their tight
cages where we have put them in the garden
under the iron oak trees.

They shake the bars, their snouts
dripping, piles of fecal matter covered
with green flies in the corners of their cages.
How they reek, puffing their red throat sacs
to holler and hoot in chorus at dawn and dusk.
The petals of the fringed iris and the tea-scented
China rose certainly shimmer then with that roar,
and even pollen spores and feeding butterflies
are shaken loose by the fetid blast.

But it all makes a nice contrast, we think.
So we let the ranging wisteria venture over
the east brick wall without pruning, the grape
hyacinths spill supremely beyond the borders
of the walk. The spirea and trumpet vines
billow up through summer at will
like surf in a storm.

And the wide, white cups of gloriosa
blossoms hang down soft, confident
and abundant from the branches of the iron oak

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where their vines have climbed. In an evening
breeze, we see them brush the roofs of those rank
cages, dawdle there in an evening breeze.
They sway and hush out of sight. Their perfume
and nectar-rain are dizzying. Their petals
shine with moonlight, just barely beyond
the reach of the horny black fingers stretching
through the bars to scratch, to encase.

Later we come close to the cages to watch
the gibbons sleeping, the straggly hairy
nakedness of their curled bodies. We imagine
they dream that the crusty calluses and bunions
of their hands and feet have turned to camellias,
to petals of pale nolana, that they sip the liquor
of honeysuckle and drink the ices of violets
and orange blossoms. We imagine they dream
that their arms and torsos are supple
vines and sturdy trunks rising unrestrained
into the night, carrying moonlight
on the blossoms and graces of their bodies
up through the sky and back to the source
of that shining.

There's a certain pity and hope
made evident by this, which is the art
we carry with us like a penance out of the garden,
along the path, and down the darkened
hallways to our beds.

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Frank Bidart

The Return

As the retreating Bructeri began to burn their own
possessions, to deny to the Romans every sustenance but
ashes,

a flying column sent by Germanicus
commanded by Lucius Stertinius

routed them;
and there, discovered amid plunder and the dead,

was the Eagle of the nineteenth
legion, lost with Varus.

•

The Romans now
brought to the land of the Bructeri, — to whatever lay
between the river Ems and the river Lippe,
to the very edge of their territory, —
devastation;

until they reached at last

the Teutoburgian Wood,
in whose darkness

Varus and the remains of his fifteen thousand men,
it was said, lay unburied.

•

Germanicus then conceived a desire
to honor with obsequies these unburied warriors whose

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massacre once filled Augustus himself with rage and
shame,—
with hope or fear every corner of the Empire,—

while the least foot soldier, facing alien
terrain, was overcome with pity when he

thought of family, friends, the sudden
reversals of battle, and shared human fate.

•

First Caecina and his men
entered,—
ordered to reconnoiter the dismal

treacherous passes, to attempt to build bridges and
causeways across the uneven, sodden marshland,—

then the rest of the army, witness to scenes
rending to sight and memory of sight.

•

Varus' first camp, with its wide sweep and deployment
of ordered space in confident dimension,
testified to the calm labors of three legions;—

then a ruined half-wall and shallow ditch
showed where a desperate remnant had
been driven to take cover;—

on the open ground between them

were whitening bones, free
from putrefaction,—

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scattered where men had been struck down
fleeing, heaped up

where they had stood their ground before slaughter.

Fragments of spears and horses' limbs lay
intertwined, while human

skulls were nailed

like insults to the tree-trunks.

Nearby groves held the altars
on which the savage Germans
sacrificed the tribunes and chief centurions.

•

Survivors of the catastrophe slowly began, at last,
to speak,—
the handful who had escaped death or slavery

told their fellow soldiers where the generals
fell, how the Eagles and standards were seized;—

one showed where Varus received his first wound, and
another, where he died by his own melancholy hand;—

those thrown into crude pits saw
gibbets above them,
as well as the platform from which Arminius

as if in delirium harangued
his own victorious troops,—

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fury and rancor so joined to his
joy, the imprisoned men thought they would soon be
butchered,—

until desecration of the Eagles at last satisfied
or exhausted his arrogance.

•

And so, six years after the slaughter,
a living Roman army had returned
to bury the dead men's bones of three whole legions,—

no man knew whether the remains that he had
gathered, touched perhaps in consigning to the earth, were

those of a stranger or a friend:—
all thought of all
as comrades and
bloodbrothers; each, in common rising

fury against the enemy, mourned at once and hated.

•

When these events were reported to Rome

Cynics whispered that *thus* the cunning State
enslaves us to its failures and its fate.—

Epicureans saw in the ghostly mire
an emblem of the nature of Desire.—

Stoics replied that life is War, ILLUSION
the source, the goal, the end of human action.

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•

At the dedication of the funeral
mound, Germanicus laid the first earth,—

thereby honoring the dead, and choosing to demonstrate
in his own person his
heartfelt share in the general grief.

He thereby earned the disapproval of Tiberius,—

perhaps because the Emperor interpreted
every action of Germanicus unfavorably; or he may have felt

the spectacle of the unburied dead
must give the army less alacrity for battle and more
respect for the enemy—
while a commander belonging to

the antique priesthood of the Augurs
pollutes himself by handling
objects belonging to the dead.

•

on the open ground

whitening bones scattered where men had been struck down fleeing

heaped up

where they stood their ground

Varus' first camp with its
wide sweep

across the open ground

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the ruined
half-wall and shallow ditch

on the open ground between them

whitening bones scattered where men had been struck down
fleeing

heaped up

where they stood their ground

I have returned here a thousand times,
though history cannot tell us its location.

•

Arminius, relentlessly pursued by
Germanicus, retreated into pathless country.

After Tacitus, *Annals*, I, 60–63.

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Three Poems by Kathleen Peirce

Nearness and Entrance

Days and nights of the most and largest changes
in her tenth year. Absolute time had always been near,
but in that year it entered her seemingly
by letting go either end. Why would a child think
of what she was before?
During the days, place stayed constant, house
of her whole life where she knew every thing
in every drawer and cupboard. Why wonder
what anything becomes?
The days made room according to the light.
She would be on a cot in the breezeway, her body
on the body of the cot, in the body of the breezeway,
being and not waiting.
It was a green meshwork as much as the woods were,
or the cottonwood letting go its fairy princesses.
Some thing would be in her hand, the white but scratched
skin of the birch she'd peeled, or ruffles off the overblown
peony. She knew fragrance as a kind of voice.
Nights were bodiless. Crickets turned from form and were
their sounds. Think of her turning off the bathroom light
to hurry the feeling on, happy to make the tub unknowable
through whiteness, happy that loud water can become its farther
part, removed from clarity and sparkling.
She is of a size that can float there. But
when she opens her body and slides forward, time enters
in a vibrancy and changes her, and leaves her this
pleasure now, later desire.

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Five Part Question

I saw the upholstery guard clamped on the back
of the seat in front of me.

I saw my own body the usual way, frontal
and from the chest down, facing the empty chair.

I saw three moving pictures: one out the window,
one the window itself, and one the whole car rocking.
The scene outside moved through the moving window,
and the window moved inside the train,
but the train moved by itself.

I saw thinking hiccup from an actual memory
of a true train to a thing I'd only thought about:
tunnel vision. Thank God it wasn't in the world outside.
It was in the aisle of the train.

I saw its inhabitant. It was you, honey, *and* your body.
O delicate and curious, can you guess what I remember
that I thought I dreamed you want?

The Many Colors

There is a clearing one hopes one is coming to
magically and without accountability but with
grave understanding any minute like a thing
you could see by peeking out the glass in a door:
the raccoon's foreleg moving from the shoulder
slowly in a roundish fear-shape toward the cat
food bowl, or the adjacent hushed-up feeling of
tenderness one feels flipping through the body
when opening an antique book of photographs
lovingly made of dead stranger children

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in a pretty library. They had turned his face
in the direction of the open window he might have
seemed to have suddenly become. The many colors
every day do as much for us as they can.
In the clear place we thought we were meant to be
brought to but not today, a letter came. It said
there was no such thing as mistaken happiness.

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Patricia Storace

A Grecian Sword, c.348 B.C.

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

I.

What happens in this world happens in gold,
the metal in our dreams that signals immortality,
bright fame, undying fire, the hour dipped
into the river of forever.
Among the grave treasures, this royal sword glows,
its hilt puckered with lustrous tiny figures in relief,
enacting a scene from the sack of Troy
already legendary when the sword was forged.
A Greek hero, probably Achilles' son,
his miniature sword upraised in glory,
leaps over a Trojan's golden corpse
to reach a woman, voluptuous in shining skirts,
who enfolds a child protectively;
clinging together in a golden arabesque of terror,
they wait, while the warrior, in his golden violence
rears a perfect muscled arm to slit
the baby's precious metal throat.
What happens in this world happens in gold.

II.

Beauty is truth, truth beauty

Life shows weightless on the scale of eternity,
which casts history as fate and act as dream.
As the crusader cuts the infidel's throat, murder is grace,

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and God's in the grenade aimed at the schoolgirl's unveiled face.
Viewed through the gold sword's narcotic gleam,
death is eternal life and torture is piety, is
God's will, that eternal trope for the ambitious—
theirs the kingdom and the power and the glory;
ours the house, the question and the hope.
Measure this object by humanity—
under the crust of jewelry lies rape,
and murder in its disfiguring ecstasy.
Shall we now say "beauty is truth,"
or recognize its ambiguity,
using the fallible candles of our eyes
to study this sword wrought so elegantly
with brilliant cruelty—and poetry.

III.

Thou silent form, dost tease us out of thought, as doth eternity.

Breathtaking time, in which we all shall die,
poets curse you, but not I
who love your labyrinth
your intricate and vital path.
Time whose harsh finality
is tempered by fluidity,
where what is lost is not replaced
but transformed with shocking grace,
correct the flawed loves I devise,
O Time in which we can revise,
Great balancer of day and night,
fuse our ethic with our appetite,
O deity of wounds that heal,
reveal in what we do and feel
that Human anguish, Human love are real.

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Joseph Harrison

The Cretonnes of Penelope

How stupid Penelope's suitors must have been,
Each morning as they elbowed for a place
Near her, and cocked their wits, eyeing each other,
Never to notice yesterday's tapestry
Had disappeared, like every day's before.

They kept maneuvering, and they kept score,
Each trying to get the better of his brother.
So each day's small creation went unseen
Unless some maid-in-waiting saw that face
Glancing from corners of the tapestry.

She wove a glimpse of him in every scene
She patterned on the vanishing tapestry.
Nor did it have to be obliquely traced
To fool the fools not looking any more,
Who couldn't tell one figure from another.

But if this game was all, she wanted more,
One friend (it wouldn't have to be a lover)
Who saw how the resourceful tapestry's
Long lesson in how never quite to mean
Inscribed the careful lines upon her face.

At night when she ripped up the tapestry
She felt she'd run a marathon in place.
Her sole delight was her most painful chore.
She knew she couldn't make it new again.
But then the sun came up, she started over.

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which is why he reads THE NEW YORKER ("klepto'd out of Chuck's crapper") and why he's actually come to believe I ought to get out of the realty business, move away of New Jersey, possibly to a place sort of like this one (he assumes there are other places like this one), maybe get into something like furniture stripping, or something hands-on and low stress and "try to get back to writing stories (He has always revered that fact that I was once a writer, and even keeps a copy of BLUE AUTUMN in his room -- it, I have seen.)

My heart, needless to say, swarms to him. Below the ragged surfaces, he means everyone, everywhere all-the-best. Cooperstown, even before he's stepped through the portals of its Hall of Fame, has won a magic if possibly brief victory over him, inducing a stress-free idyll of small-pond, big-fish style ordinary-ness he would dearly love. Seemingly and for the moment his ill-fitting "rings" have locked down into perfect place, and I can't help wondering if this spasm of enthusiasm and empire planning isn't likely to be the happiest moment of his life, even though he may look back on it with no clarity, no grasp of the details, and even cause greater anxiety and warping since he'll never exactly summon it up again. This double view, of course, is the view I had when he was small and talked to people who weren't there -- though apparently I gave off the wrong signals. But I should've known, as I know now and as it ever is with kids: nothing stays as it seems or as it is for long. And there's no such thing as a false sense of security.

A manuscript page from Independence Day.

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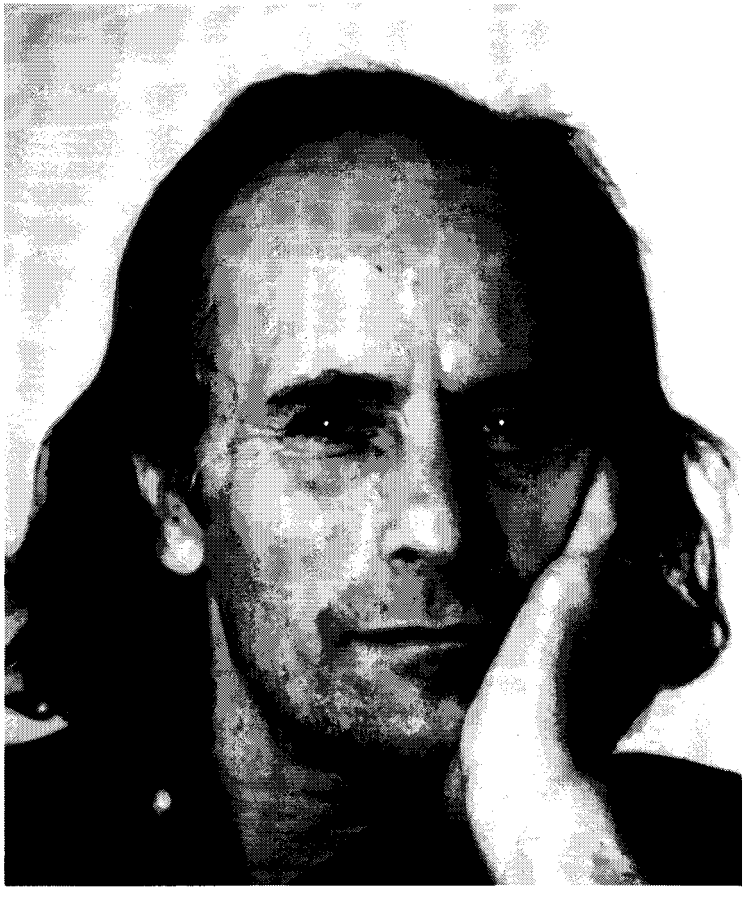

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Richard Ford

The Art of Fiction CXLVII

When Richard Ford's first novel, A Piece of My Heart, *was published in 1976, he appeared to be a gifted novelist much indebted to William Faulkner. Since then his novels, including* The Ultimate Good Luck *and* Wildlife, *and his much acclaimed collection of short stories,* Rock Springs, *have proved him a much less predictable writer and one harder to catego-*

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rize. His single volume of stories has established him as a master of the genre. His most recent novel, Independence Day, *which brought back Frank Bascombe from* The Sportswriter, *now as a harassed real-estate agent, was awarded both the Pulitzer Prize and Pen/Faulkner Award for fiction for 1995, the only book ever so awarded. In Frank Bascombe, Ford has created one of the most complex and memorable characters of our time, and the novel itself is a nuanced, often hilarious portrait of contemporary American life.* Independence Day *has been called "the definitive novel of the postwar generation," and Ford himself has been hailed as "one of the finest curators of the great American living museum." In setting, types of characters, plots, point of view and, most importantly, in ever broadening sympathy, Ford has, as he remarks in this interview, consciously kept moving on.*

The following interview took place on a warm breezy July day in a large seaside house Ford sometimes rents outside of Jamestown, Rhode Island. Dressed in khakis and loose blue shirt, Ford seemed relaxed as he enjoyed the beautiful weather on the large veranda surrounding the house, where the interview began. We soon moved indoors, where the breeze from the open windows kept us pleasantly cool. He answered questions slowly and thoughtfully but without any evident selfconsciousness about word choices. Although originally reluctant to be interviewed, Ford was genuinely cordial and unhurried (although we spoke for more than three hours), and when I thanked him at the end he said he preferred to see the afternoon as a "literary conversation" rather than as an interview. Ford took obvious pleasure in his rented house, which had a view across high grass to the sea (though he warned of deer ticks and the danger of Lyme disease). Later he said he was thinking of offering to buy the property, and that one of his greatest regrets was selling his house in Mississippi. Frank Bascombe the real estate agent did not seem far away.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any one aspect of fiction that is particularly central to you?

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RICHARD FORD

These days, when I'm writing every morning and afternoon, the distinctions among such fictive concerns as narrative strategy, story, character and dramatic structure don't seem very isolable. I'm always interested in *words*, and no matter what I'm doing—describing a character or a landscape or writing a line of dialogue—I'm moved, though not utterly commanded by an interest in the sound and rhythm of the words, in addition, I ought to say, to what the words actually denote. Most writers are probably like that, don't you think? Sometimes I'll write a sentence that sets up an opportunity for say, a direct object or predicate adjective and I won't have a clue what the word is except that I know what I don't want—the conventional word: "The night grew dark." I don't want *dark*. I might, though, want a word that has four syllables, and a long *a* sound in it. Maybe it'll mean *dark*, or maybe it'll take a new direction. I'll have some kind of inchoate metrical model in my mind. One of the ways sentences can surprise their maker, please their reader and uncover something new is that they get to the sense they make by other than ordinary logical means.

INTERVIEWER

You're unusually sound-oriented for a fiction writer.

FORD

I don't exactly know why that is, but probably it was just the way I *could* do it. And even though I may be "sound-oriented," I'm not sure that shows up in the sentences I write in ways the reader would necessarily notice.

INTERVIEWER

Does your concern for language and especially for sound lead you to poetry?

FORD

I'd love to be able to write poetry, but I think if I ever brought my attention down to that meticulous level of utter-

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ance, I'd never be able to ratchet it back up to the wider level of reference that, for me, fiction requires. Quite a few of my teacher and writer friends have been poets over the years: Donald Hall, James McMichael, Michael Ryan, Larry Raab, Dan Halpern, C.K. Williams.

INTERVIEWER

Putting aside the sound of language, how important is the development of character to you?

FORD

Well, we wouldn't have moral dilemmas and conflicts without them. But when I started trying to write, inventing characters was sort of hard for me. I'd thought about characters first from having read the practical criticism of E.M. Forster and Henry James and Percy Lubbock, who all talked about characters that were, in the first place, already written—and mostly written under the influence of nineteenth-century ideas of what human character was. Character seemed to me, therefore, a rather fixed quotient. Forster did say in *Aspects of the Novel* that characters ought to have the "incalculability of life." But I didn't find his own characters to be that way. Maybe I was naive. Let's say I *was* naive. But they seemed, say in *A Passage to India*, pretty hard-sided, pretty strictly representative of their class or gender or religion. I, on the other hand, already had a personal experience of character—mine and others—which definitely stressed the incalculable, the obscure, the unpredictable. I'm not sure the word *character* ever came up in my childhood family life—except that so-and-so was "a character." Plus, my family was given to explain almost nothing about people. People just were the mysterious sum of their actions. So, from a shortage of information, I was already making people up long before I became a writer—actual people—doing it just to make them seem more knowable.

Today I think of characters—actual *and* literary characters—as being rather *un*fixed. I think of them as changeable, provisional, unpredictable, decidedly unwhole. Partly this owes to the act of *writing* characters, and of succeeding somewhat in

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making them seem believable and morally provoking. As I write them they *are* provisional, changeable and so forth, right on through and beyond the process of being made. I can change them at will, and do. For instance, I can come upon an adjective which seems to have nothing to do with the person I thought I was inventing—an important adjective—*good* or *bad*, for instance, and I can use it and see where it takes me. I can also erase it—maybe I've convinced myself that we make ourselves up pretty much the way I make characters up in books. But this is the development of character, in my view; not the setting out of something fixed, which is how I thought of them when I was beginning. Maybe this view deviates from the conventional view of character. Maybe I'm guilty of writing deviant characters. But I don't think so. Of course not, right?

INTERVIEWER

Well, don't you think people have characters?

FORD

I certainly think we have *histories*. And based on them we can purport to have characters—invent or allege character, in a sense. And sometimes histories predict what people will do. Though often not. But character is just one of those human pseudo-essences that is often used detrimentally. Certainly a lot of modern fiction derives its drama from the conflict between assumed character and some specific action that deviates from it.

But let me give you another kind of example of what I'm talking about. I was working on a scene in which a man goes over to a woman's house—a woman he's sort of in love with. All along I've been thinking that one of the things that'll happen in this scene will be that she'll cut him loose, because earlier she's seemed uncertain about him. In my plan, she's going to say to him that their relationship is heading nowhere and she wants something better, and she's not married to him so why should she go on with somebody who doesn't satisfy her. But I get to the part of the scene in which I have her start to tell him the preliminary things that are going to eventuate in

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her saying that they aren't going to be lovers anymore. And she says, "You know, I was driving back from New York today and I was just thinking about you. I knew you were going to be here, and I knew we would have dinner." And I'm writing along and it suddenly seems right for her to say, "And I thought what a sweet man you are"—which is what I write. He's listening, and he says, "I try to be a sweet man. But what?" And she says (I have her say), "But nothing." What happened at that moment was that it occurred to me that she *not* fall into this track that I'd predicted for her—into the form of her character that I'd devised. Based on how the scene felt I completely switched the dynamics. What happens next is that he—not she—tries his best to get out of their relationship as quickly and smoothly as possible. Which, for a couple of hundred pages, he does. But have you ever had to call somebody on the phone, somebody you wanted to get rid of, only you end up doing nothing but getting yourself in more deeply? Now *that's* something about life that interests me. That's incalculability, if on a small scale: how we cope with contingency in ourselves but try still to accept responsibility for our acts. You can say, of course, that in this situation my "character" or the woman's character in my book is simply irresolute. That's my, or her, character. But then we may not do it that way the next time. So, you're left with a somewhat defective concept.

INTERVIEWER

Do you start off with the end in mind?

FORD

I certainly think about it a lot before I start, and I like to have some clear idea of my destination. But I eventually get to the point in my planning at which I begin to feel I'm sacrificing useful time that I could be using to write by holding off until I can figure out what the ending is going to be. Then I think to myself, Well, start. Start. Start. As I write, I, of course, think about these things more. Don DeLillo said, "Writing is a concentrated form of thinking"—thinking, I

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assume, about the things that you sense are important and that could or will find their way into your book—including where it'll end.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have the title for *Independence Day* when you started writing it?

FORD

That was nearly the first thing I *did* have. The word *independence* had some important-seeming appeal for me, a kind of attractive density, and I wanted to know what the constituents of that appeal were, what I could invent based on that sensation. In this case I ended up trying to figure out a lot about human independence, and so the Fourth of July just seemed a good time to set it. I like setting stories on holidays. The reader will be more likely to have a set of personal, vivid memories I can engage—that is, if I'm any good.

INTERVIEWER

During the course of your career, has the way you work changed?

FORD

My first book was about the South and was captivated by certain traditional southern themes—search for place, freedom of choice, s-e-x—all inherited literary concerns. And it was also probably directly influenced by Faulkner and Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor and God knows who else southern. But during that time—the seventies—I was also reading a great deal of what are now rather drearily called postmodernist stories and essays. Their formal concern with language—words and phrases and sentences simply as sources of sound or as spatial objects or sometimes as nonsense—made me recognize that my own attraction to and reasonably sensitive ear for language was an even larger virtue than I already thought. As I said, ideas are things I'm interested in, whether I'm any good at negotiating them or not. But the most palpable urge

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on the level of moment-to-moment writing is following intuition as expressed in language—words. Of course, unlike some of the so-called postmodernists, for me language is finally put to the service of what I judge to be something larger—human concerns such as affection, or family ties or independence. William Gass's rather French idea of interest being in the pane of glass as much as in what you see through the glass is very powerful to me. But I'm also mightily interested in what you see when you look outside.

INTERVIEWER

Aside from length, is there any difference between writing a novel and writing short stories?

FORD

Novels are a lot harder to write. Long ones, anyway.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

FORD

Because they hold so much more *stuff*, and the stuff all has to be related and make one whole—at least the way I do it. And from my experience with writing both, I do think writing a long novel is just a larger human effort than writing a book of short stories—assuming that both are good. I used to say that a novel was a more *important*, a grander literary gesture than a story. And when Ray Carver would hear me say that he'd vigorously disagree, and then I'd always cave in. But he's gone now, and the fun's gone out of that argument. I don't care, to tell you the truth. Is a week in bounteous Paris more important than twenty-four hours in somewhat less majestic Chinook, Montana, if in Chinook your life changes forever? If it is for you, it is; if it isn't, well? Forms of literature don't compete. They don't *have* to compete. We can have it all.

INTERVIEWER

When something comes to you, do you know whether it's going to be a short story or a novel?

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FORD

That's a decision I make before I start to write. Somewhere in the mulch of my thinking, the material I'm attracted to and the selection of a form it might find come together almost preconsciously; so that by the time I'm thinking to myself, Write this and then this and then this, I'm already supposing I want to write a novel or a novella or a story.

INTERVIEWER

You said that when you began writing stories you weren't good at it. How did your stories go from bad to good? Practice? Breakthroughs?

FORD

Not practice. I actually gave up writing stories for a time because I couldn't do it and couldn't get better and didn't see any use in just beating my head against them. So, I started writing a novel. I had been trying to write stories under the influence of Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, William Gass—all writers whose work I still greatly admire. But my instincts, I guess, weren't particularly well served by those narrative practices and conceits. So when I quit trying to write that way I sort of reverted to the more traditional, realistic fiction that suited what I could do. I, of course, had grown up thinking that what Faulkner and Eudora Welty wrote was what literature was. I remember very well that when we got married in 1968, Kristina gave me *The Collected Stories of Peter Taylor*. It was the first book she'd ever given me. Then when I got to Irvine as a graduate student my teachers—Oakley Hall and E.L. Doctorow—were moving me back in the direction of more realistic stories. I read all of Cheever and Richard Yates and Bellow and Roth. Plus Babel. Plus Chekhov. Later on, when I started reading my contemporaries—Ray Carver, Joy Williams, Mary Robison, Ann Beattie and others—I thought, Here are story forms that provide the opportunity for me to write the kinds of things that I know and am ready to put in stories. I think I was very encouraged by the good work of my contemporaries, which is what good work should

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do. It shouldn't make you feel intimidated. By the time my first decent stories started to get published in *Esquire*, I had already written two novels. I wrote the first story in *Rock Springs* in the spring of 1980 in New York. Another thing that encouraged me to write stories was that people were asking me to give readings, and I wanted to read new work. I wrote my little story "Sweethearts" because Dan Halpern asked me to read for the benefit of *Columbia* magazine, and I didn't have a new story, so I wrote that in just one sitting—as usual—at a table in a rented house. In Princeton—a story set in Montana. Basically I just wrote one short story a year so that I had something new to read.

INTERVIEWER

What about editing?

FORD

I've always had a lot of editing done on every book except the second one, *The Ultimate Good Luck*, which Donald Hall read when it was written in the first person. We met in New York in that little Irish bar next to the Algonquin, and he told me there that it wasn't any good. That was a horrible moment. We'd come into this little dark gloomy bar, and Donald put his hands on the table, looked at me and said, "I don't like your book." Whooh! You just have to take a deep breath and suck it up. I said, "Okay, okay, tell me what you can tell me." He told me all the things he didn't like about it and moreover told me he didn't know what the hell I was going to do with it, because it just wasn't any good this way.

INTERVIEWER

And what was the fate of that book?

FORD

I took it back, and I changed the point of view from first to third, and it got published, though not many people read

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it. It's in paperback now, and somebody's making a movie out of it—so it's gone on to have a life and a readership.

INTERVIEWER

Did Donald Hall ever get back to you and say, "Well, I was wrong"?

FORD

He wasn't wrong. It wasn't a good book as I'd written it. But I changed the point of view, and in doing so, let the book admit a whole other wealth of material which the first person hadn't permitted. I didn't know what woes a change like that was going to impose on me, but it took then another year to reimagine in the third person.

INTERVIEWER

The first person point of view is easier?

FORD

I don't think it's easier, at least not in a generic sense. Each way of narrating has its beauties and its difficulties.

INTERVIEWER

Some critics have said that they consider you a particularly male writer. Do you see yourself that way?

FORD

I think that's a lot of crap. My narrators have so far been men, but not always the principal characters. I give female characters equally good lines as male characters and, more importantly, equal opportunities within the stories to control their fates, which is what it means in lived life to be powerful.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you could have a female protagonist or narrator?

FORD

I think I could, but who knows? My basic feeling is women and men are more alike than unalike, and the ways they're

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different are both obvious and comprehensible and not as interesting as they're made out to be. The thing that makes a male character interesting is the same thing that makes a female character interesting: access to a variety of humors; a capacity to face moral uncertainty; the ability to surprise, to show compassion. I would never, for instance, say to myself, "What would a woman say?" Rather, I'd think, Given the circumstances of this person's life, what would this person say? Or do? Jim Harrison wrote a very good novella, *The Woman Lit By Fireflies*, in which the "point of view" character is a woman. And what he brought to that story, among other talents, was a great sympathetic sensibility. I think that sympathy for the people who are your creations is what's necessary—not a gender sensitivity.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think of your audience as male?

FORD

My audience is women *and* men. I've had enough experiences in my life to know that my readers are a variety of people. Once Tobias Wolff and I gave a reading out in North Dakota, and a man came up to tell us he read our books during his lunch breaks, sitting on his tractor out in the wheat fields. He was followed by two women who said they were lesbians and wanted us to know they didn't think we were sexists, or whatever it was we'd been accused of that week. Maybe this isn't enough evidence. I could cite more if you'd like.

INTERVIEWER

Are any of your protagonists like you?

FORD

Some of them may be something like me insofar as they're people for whom I have a sympathy. I think I wrote about sixteen-year-old boys in part because I had sympathy from my own past. But I'm not interested in revealing myself directly in those stories. That would risk solipsism and, truthfully, I'm

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not that interesting. Plus, I get enough reward from my work not to have to make it be about me. Readers may conclude otherwise, but I feel stories are sold short by insisting on how much they supposedly do or don't rely on or reveal the writer's life. That insistence sells short the beauty and pleasing freedom of invention. My novella "Jealous" and many of the stories in *Rock Springs* are written in the first person, but I didn't grow up in Montana and none of the things that happened to those characters ever happened to me. When *Rock Springs* came out, occasionally someone would ask, "Were you born in Montana?" and I would say, "No, I was born in Mississippi." They wouldn't quite know what to say. Asking the question may have helped them understand something about fiction, though: *it's made up.*

INTERVIEWER

How about Sam Newel's memories in *A Piece of My Heart*? Were they autobiographical?

FORD

That book has a few oblique references from my life—altered and put to the service of some bit of invention. I didn't say I didn't *use* my own life as raw material. But for instance the vignette about meeting a dwarf in the lobby of a hotel and going upstairs with him. Something like that happened to me. Then, there is another in which two women are lying in bed together drunk in the hotel room, and Sam Newel sees them naked. I saw such things. I saw a lot of fairly lurid things when I was a little boy. I don't mean I was taken care of poorly, but I saw a lot because my grandparents ran a big hotel in Little Rock. Also my father was a traveling salesman, and he would sometimes be gone for hours at a time, and I'd get left alone in hotels. Not left alone in perilous ways, but when I was ten, eleven, twelve, I saw a lot of stuff. I seem to have some magnetism for lurid things. Also, there must be some vibration that comes off all writers, not just me. People tell me the most remarkably personal stories. They often ask me, "If I tell you something, will you not use it?" And I tell them

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that if they tell me, I *will* use it. And then they usually say, "What the hell, I'll never see you again," (which isn't always true) and tell me anyway. What I do by way of using the stories people tell me is that I write them down in my notebook; but nothing ever comes back out exactly as it went in. Usually it comes back better.

INTERVIEWER

You've written about your deep affection for your mother and your friendship with her. Is she a source for any of your characters?

FORD

I don't think I ever knowingly wrote about my mother, except in the memoir I wrote directly about her. But I know that there are qualities I attribute to my mother which are qualities some of my characters have. There is the toughing-it-out quality of the mother in *Wildlife,* which my mother certainly possessed, particularly after my father died; so that if she made a mistake, or was less than extremely cautious in my welfare, which occasionally happened, she would look at me and say, "Well, I love you, and I tried my best and that's that." That's a quality I don't find in many people. My wife has that quality in even more admirable ways. Also, my mother was humorous, without being exactly mirthful; and she was also ironic in a quite obvious and superficial way that concealed (and not very well, either) a vast storage of empathy. And she was nicely inconsistent in most of her views except her view of whom she loved.

INTERVIEWER

What I've always enjoyed so much about your writing is the humor, which is missing in most of contemporary literature, it seems to me.

FORD

In me, that comes partly from being a southerner. When I was growing up, absurd humor was big in my and my friends'

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lives. We also mimicked each other and everybody else; we did voices; we were all blessed with a kind of aspiring-to-be-affluent fecklessness. Plus, we lived in an absurd racist society in which we—arrogant, ignorant, suburban kids—were the privileged ones. What could be more ridiculous! I guess I just didn't lose that sense of ridiculousness—mine and others'—when I came north.

Also, the writers I like are always writers who *can be* humorous, whether they always are or not—a lot of Jewish writers: Stanley Elkin, Bruce Jay Friedman, Philip Roth. Plus Joan Didion, Walker Percy, Barry Hannah. Those are the writers I cut my teeth on.

INTERVIEWER

Mark Twain must have been a big influence.

FORD

No. I'm not of the school that says that Harriet Beecher Stowe was a better writer than Mark Twain, but the Twain I read when I was growing up, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, curiously enough evoked little river towns I myself knew up and down the Mississippi, and just at the time when I wanted to get as far away from that kind of folksy, homespun, cracker-barrel sophistication as I could get. I wanted to read about England; I wanted to read about New England; I wanted to read about France; I did *not* want to read about life on the Mississippi, because I knew what life on the Mississippi was like. I've gone back and tried to read *Life on the Mississippi* as recently as twenty years ago but couldn't crack it. I know that's a heresy. Sorry.

INTERVIEWER

Did you go across the street and see Eudora Welty?

FORD

Well, she'd moved away by the time I might have done that, and I didn't meet Miss Welty until 1981, when she came to Princeton, where I was teaching, to give a reading. I had

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only published one book. I had a feeling she probably knew about it; that it was full of dirty words and sex and violence. And when I met her it didn't seem to have registered that I was from Jackson and had written a novel. I remember saying to her, "Miss Welty, I'm Richard Ford, and I'm from Jackson, Mississippi." She has a wonderful way about her; she said, "Oh, you are?"—but nothing else. And I thought, Gee, what that means is that she hates my book. I felt horrible about it. And I then published another book full of sex and violence, and I thought, Well, I'm just out of the Eudora Welty sweepstakes here. We're never going to be friends. Then I wrote *The Sportswriter* and did a book-signing at Lemuria Books in Jackson. I was sitting there at my little table signing books, and I looked up and here was Miss Welty. She said, "Well, I had to come pay my respects." I felt beatified. I felt, Finally I've written a book you aren't too embarrassed by to come and meet me. I've gone on to be wonderful friends with her. I see her often. In addition to being a great writer she's also one of the wittiest people I've ever been around. She does voices, she mimics, she has a sensitivity to the absurdities of language. She also has a vivid memory for song lyrics. She's a performer who simply didn't choose to perform upon a conventional stage. Her work often doesn't seem funny, but then is funny under the surface—sometimes even quite grave stories. I remember one time I was walking with her into a bookstore. They had prepared a big celebration for her birthday. Somebody was standing beside a helium cylinder and was filling balloon after balloon. Each time, the little machine would give off a kind of *sshoou* sound, and Eudora said, "Oh, I thought it was someone sighing at my arrival."

INTERVIEWER

You talk about escaping Mississippi, the racism . . .

FORD

My family life was wonderful. I was raised by people I loved and I have great friends there, but the race part was bad. The cynicism of the whites, me included.

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INTERVIEWER

You didn't like yourself.

FORD

I didn't like what I was headed toward becoming. If I'd gone on, stuck in my niche, I would never have been a conservative, but I wouldn't have been proud of myself either. Another conflicted southern boy. I simply didn't understand some very fundamental things in Mississippi in the early sixties and fifties: why it was we went to separate schools, why all this violence. Oh, I could understand it as long as it was sort of boilerplate, which is to say, "That's how things are down south." But if I had to say, as I began to do when I was a teenager, "Well, let's just piece this out a bit." I couldn't piece it out, couldn't make racism make sense. We didn't talk about that stuff much in my family. My father was dead by the time I was sixteen; my mother was not an analytic person. But neither of them were racists.

INTERVIEWER

How old were you when James Meredith was enrolled at the University of Mississippi?

FORD

I was eighteen. By that time I was at Michigan State. I was not brave enough or committed enough or selfless enough to stay in Mississippi during the civil-rights movement. I wanted to get out of it. I wanted to go as far away from Mississippi as I could. And it wasn't just about race. It was about wanting to get out of the South because I wanted to see the rest of the country. Television had alerted me to New York, Chicago, Los Angeles. I certainly don't want to paint myself back then in any way to seem what I wasn't, which is to say, enlightened. I wasn't enlightened. I was nothing, that's what I was. But I knew I was a little nothing—which helped. I knew that there were terrible things coming in Mississippi. I just thought, Uh oh, bad times are coming. I've got to get out of here to save myself. To reinvent myself.

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INTERVIEWER

How much of that anguish has worked its way into your fiction?

FORD

Well, I think it's worked into my writing in one good way, which is that I want to write about dramatic, important things that engage my sympathies. That's been the most certifying thing in my life—that I've gone toward where my sympathies led me rather than toward where social pressures or convention might've led. That's good luck for a novelist.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have black friends when you were growing up?

FORD

No, not in Mississippi. They lived on the other side of town. But in Arkansas I did.

INTERVIEWER

What are the sympathies that have taken you back to Mississippi?

FORD

I'm proud of it because of the huge changes it's undergone and survived. And like I said: it's where I was born. I like it there.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write when you were at law school?

FORD

Not much. But I think going to law school was probably very important to me because, when I started to try to write stories, I realized how much writing stories was like writing briefs. It's writing to persuade someone. I don't want to drag this similarity much further, but what I understand about the law (case law, anyway) is that it is something made up by

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lawyers to convince juries and judges, which then goes on to affect lived life in important ways; and the novel is sentences made up by writers to persuade readers et cetera, et cetera. They have very much the same rhetorical address.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder if you feel that you have to be more intelligent than your characters in order to understand or control them.

FORD

Is the potter superior to his exquisite vase? No. But when I'm writing characters, the discrepancy between my intelligence and theirs is as narrow as I can make it because I'm trying to make my intelligence act in the service of these creations. Some critics have occasionally suggested that I impose on characters certain possibilities of thought or language or emotional experience which that particular character, or to put it more gruesomely, those *kinds* of characters wouldn't likely be able to think or talk about. But my attitude is that there are no such things as *kinds* or types of characters in fiction or in life. Eloquence or penetrating understanding can visit anybody. In fact, it's fiction's business to try to enlarge our understanding of and sympathy for people. If, to do that, I have to strain your conventional understanding about humans—well that's also art's proper business, and my hope is that I'll repay your indulgence.

INTERVIEWER

Do you make all the decisions for your characters?

FORD

All of them. Unless I make a typo and I like the mistake better than the word I wanted—which I did once. Somewhere, I think it was probably in *The Sportswriter*, I meant to write that somebody was "cold-eyed," only I typed "old-eyed," and Kristina told me how good she thought that was. So, naturally I kept it.

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INTERVIEWER

Elsewhere you've said you like story endings that "close like supernovas and leave you gasping." Do you have the same desire for the end of your novels?

FORD

At the end of my novels, I certainly want the reader to say, "Boy-o-boy!" (that is, in an admiring way). However, I try to be cautious about creating pyrotechnics at the end of a story *or* a novel, effects that might cause the end to have a luminous quality the story or novel itself hasn't quite underwritten, or provided the opportunity for. Many wonderful stories by any number of wonderful writers don't give the opportunity to end in that precisely luminous way. I admit that when I write a story that does provide such an opportunity I feel fortunate. I think it certainly intensifies a reader's experience at a moment when he's notably available to the story. I think endings are important for the life of the story and, if I can demark that ending by making it significant to a reader, then I have done the reader a service. I do have, though, a long and good relationship with a certain magazine editor who has particularly liked the endings of some of my stories. This is Rust Hills, at *Esquire*, who has been a wonderful editor for me. And sometimes when he's encouraging me to write a story he can publish he'll say, "And make it have one of those Richard Ford endings." But that isn't always possible.

INTERVIEWER

In your introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 1990*, you said you only know one or maybe one and a half ways to express verisimilitude. What do you mean by that?

FORD

I was probably exaggerating by admitting to an extra half. But I was referring, tongue-in-cheek, to Frank O'Connor's tongue-in-cheek remark in *The Lonely Voice*, where he said there were dozens of ways to express verisimilitude—that quality in a piece of fiction, or the strategy in a story which makes

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the story seem like real life, true life on the page. A slippery matter in a slippery world. Mine was just a way of saying that I do things my way, though you can do things your way as you please. Fiction always uses language to refer the reader to lived life—life outside the story. This is true irrespective of how hermetic, how self-referring, how abstract, how language-preoccupied, how circular the individual story happens to be. The reader will always take what he finds in the story back to life, somehow, even if that's not the story's primary appeal, as in many of Borges's wonderful stories or in Barthelme's "The Indian Uprising." Even if it's just that you think about the story later, in another context or another room, you've taken it to your own real life and you've somehow used it. This inevitability is built into the necessity that there be a reader for a story to be fully consummated.

In this way, fiction's a bit like a notative system in ballet, where there are instructions to tell a dancer where to step, et cetera. You can't take the analogy terribly far, unfortunately, because in the analogy the dancer has to be reader and author at once. But words are the notations in stories, and the reader covers them by reading. It's after that, I suppose, that all those diverse ways of bonding to the *real* commence: based on the words, the reader then entertains the multitudinous truth of life in a multitude of ways.

When I've written about Montana, some people—not all, by any means—have said to me, "God, you really got it right." And my answer always is, "Well thanks, but I never tried to get it right, if by *right* you mean that I got it the way Montana is on earth." I mostly just wanted to make it interesting on the page and to ignite the reader's imagination. What I'm sure happens in sealing the bond of persuasiveness or believability, or even verisimilitude, is that when people read sentences (particularly if they like them) they then go on and fill in from their own lives what that piece of fiction seems to refer to (I hope not too divergently from my set of notations, of course, because then the story's a failure, or a kind of literary idiot savant). The completion of the illusion happens in the reader's mind—the way Sartre and Duchamp and hundreds

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of people who aren't French have said. I suppose another form of verisimilitude would be for me to call a landscape Montana, but then have the details be from Mississippi. I haven't tried that yet.

INTERVIEWER

You once talked about "committing a story" instead of writing a story. What do you mean by committing a story?

FORD

It's just a pretentious way of saying that for me, personally and emotionally, to write a story is to give myself up totally to this otherwise flimsy piece of business. I commit myself. It wasn't meant as an attempt to ennoble me or the product, but to describe the kind of emotional event in my life that I will eventually ask the reader to share in whatever way he can—to participate in the story as fully as possible. Though I suppose, too, it's another way of saying that I try to make the whole experience—writing it and reading it—as important as I can.

INTERVIEWER

Could you talk about the fact that *The Sportswriter* takes place over Easter weekend?

FORD

Easter was simply when I started to write the book in 1982. It's as simple as that. By the time I finished it though, I was aware of the way in which it was about various sorts of redemption—this despite the fact that I didn't have an elaborate religious background or underground or any religious beliefs at all. But I didn't want to be one of the writers who doesn't understand his own books, so I tried to be aware of my books' unexpected implications. A writer for *Time* magazine pointed out that there were fourteen chapters, matching the fourteen stations of the cross. That was the first time I'd heard that. But when you start manipulating mythical narratives, whether you blunder into them or you do it by calculation, you'd

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better—to be in control of your book—reckon with their true potency and wide reference. They haven't persisted all these years because they represent trivial human matters. You heard it here first.

INTERVIEWER

I want to ask you about names. At one time you said you "contemplate them very hard" and yet you've also said that the fact that Brinson is the last name of the main characters of "Optimists" and of *Wildlife* "was quite an accident." Do you believe in accidents like that?

FORD

There are always certain things I just don't notice as much as I try to notice everything. I had the same problem with names in *Independence Day*. I repeat names thinking they're brand new. I do care a lot about names and once I find one I like and that seems serviceable it keeps coming back in my head over and over. Good names seem so rare to me. Plus, my wife can testify to my general belief that if one of something is good, ten times is ten times better.

INTERVIEWER

Have you had any other accidents with names?

FORD

I don't know, but I'm sure there will be in the fullness of time. It's just one of those things about me that's unchangeable. I search and search for the right name to hook up with—some inchoate feeling that could develop into a character. I want to have some strong, good feeling about any name I use. When I wrote *The Sportswriter*, I was writing with a loose understructure which only I knew about and that probably isn't detectable by the reader. It was Joshua Slocum's famous book *Sailing Alone Around the World*. To my brain, there are, in my book, certain focal points that are closely similar to events in his. Indeed, the whole time I was writing the book, I called Frank, Frank Slocum and not Frank Bascombe.

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I fully intended that he be Frank Slocum when the book was finished. But when Donald Hall read the manuscript, he pointed out that Slocum was the name of Joseph Heller's protagonist-narrator in *Something Happened*, and because that's a book that I think also had a distant influence on *The Sportswriter*, I felt I had to change it. But I was thrown for a loop. Maybe Heller's character was lurking somewhere too, and I blanked it out. And I realized that unless I wrote a garishly inappropriate new name it probably wouldn't matter to the reader. But to me it mattered hugely, to my feeling of familiarity with my character (characters being, at least early on in fiction, their names). The character's name, though, had to be two syllables and had to start with a consonant. It also had to end with an *m* sound. Fortunately, I had months to make a list.

INTERVIEWER

In talking about *The Sportswriter* you referred to two suburban towns in New Jersey and to Detroit and Florida and you said, "Those are the pylons of the novel." What does that mean? Is it related to the Joshua Slocum book?

FORD

All I meant was that if you put a string around those places—Detroit and the little towns in New Jersey and Florida—that little rhomboid would basically form the geographical points of reference for the story's action. This figure is one (rather obscure, possibly meaningless) abstraction the book describes, and for some reason that's always important to me, to notice things like that—but probably *only* important to me. Such are the loony compulsions of novelists, compulsions spawned by sitting years alone in tiny rooms, I guess.

INTERVIEWER

Is that the only book you see in geometric terms? Does every novel have a figure in that way?

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FORD

In one way or other. It's like the line a ballerina strikes with her body. That line is dramatic in relation to something—empty space, another dancer, scenery. The context. (I don't know why I'm so attached to dancing today. Probably it's a means to escape my own dull vocabulary.) But so far, the human actions in all the stories I've written, by which I mean to include novels as stories, have struck some kind of—for me—dramatic relation with a fictive place. There may be an actual place, too, a place on the earth with the same name and similar geographical coordinates. But my places are all made up and used for my convenience, and sometimes my convenience requires alterations in the actual—say, if I like some word better than the word that actually describes the real place. Usually places are backgrounds for me, contexts made of interesting language and maybe even evoking striking mental pictures, in front of which characters perform the important actions of the story. But in each case, there is some kind of dramatic abstract—call it a figure, shape, line—that the up-front goings-on make in relation to the setting. I feel it as a kind of necessary tensiveness, and it's no less so as stories move from place to place. The reader, of course, may be altogether unaware of it, which is okay.

INTERVIEWER

That's interesting because when I think of *The Sportswriter* it seems a very mental book.

FORD

But if it didn't have that movement among those places, didn't have that tensiveness in it, then it would be a static book, too. Some kind of movement or physical motion is important to me. Aristotle thought that action was physical action and that mental action is important as it prefigures physical action. You can say thinking is an action, but I've always been of the belief that physical action is of higher importance than meditation and cogitation. No matter if that action is outweighed by mental activity in terms of how much

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time is dedicated to it. For example, I never believed we really sin in thought, only in our deeds. So I want people to move, to act, to have a dramatic relation with space. When I had Vicki smack Frank in the chops and knock him down in *The Sportswriter*, that's the purest example of what I find interesting in a book: not simply that she loves him or he loves her, but that it eventuates in her acting.

INTERVIEWER

Another question about names: one critic pointed out that in the middle of Robard Hewes and Sam Newel is the word *ewe*. Any relevance?

FORD

Accident. I'll tell you why I think so, though the Doctor Freuds of the world will snicker. Robard *Hughes* was the name of a boy from my childhood. And I wanted to use that name because I liked it, but I wanted to change it so that it wouldn't be confused with my chum. Newel is actually the name of several boys from my childhood. Some other astute critic pointed out that the *ewe* sound must be related to the Lambs, other characters in the novel. What that relation's importance might've been I don't now remember. But Mr. Lamb is in the story because of a Mr. Ham from my childhood. I changed Ham to Lamb because it sounded the same. In all cases it was a matter of sounds. I hate to be such a disappointing patient.

INTERVIEWER

You've said, "I want everybody to look at this novel, this story exactly as I do." Does that desire lead you to want to respond to critics?

FORD

Not unless the interpretation is totally off. When a critic says *Wildlife* is about incest between the mother and son, what I *want* to say is, "No, it's not. You're wrong." Though in that particular case I didn't say anything to the critic—poor man. I didn't write a letter. Actually, I've only written one

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letter and never made a phone call or confronted someone to defend a book of mine against an unfriendly criticism. It doesn't seem appropriate or fruitful, though I've thought about doing it. But, in my books I try to authorize everything. I do everything I can to narrow the range of divergence between what I understand and what the reader understands, though complete harmony is, of course, improbable. But I think books are successful in terms of how successful I am, at least as a first principle, in narrowing that range of response. You can get all kinds of critics to line up and say that my book states exactly the opposite of what I think it states, but that's rubbish. Unless I'm just nuts, and as yet I'm not.

INTERVIEWER

Have any critical judgments or reading about your work been useful to you?

FORD

One, that I can remember. Walter Clemons wrote in *Newsweek* that he didn't think that *The Ultimate Good Luck* took sufficient advantage of my wider sympathies and humor as much as he felt was true of *A Piece of My Heart*. It was one of the most significant things I'd ever read about something I'd written. I realized that I shouldn't be writing books that short circuit what I know or what I'm capable of, that I should be writing books which try to exploit as much as possible what of value I am as a human being, without having to be about me.

INTERVIEWER

Any unexpected responses?

FORD

Some that were hurtful. *Wildlife* got the most effusive praise of any book I've written before *Independence Day*, but it also got the widest variety of responses—some very negative, which I found perplexing. I didn't consider it an unduly complicated book. But I concluded that it was about such a sensitive subject that some readers simply couldn't deal with it—and therefore

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rejected it—though it's also possible I just didn't write it convincingly enough to persuade everybody, which *is* what I always want to do. My favorite scene in *Wildlife* is the one in which young Joe's mother confronts him in the hall late at night, when both of them are only partly dressed—Joe, because he'd been innocently in bed, his mother because she'd been with a man. But that scene really made some people unhappy. I've tried to figure it out if it is because Joe has his underwear on or because his mother was partly unclothed. One young male interviewer asked me, "Why do you always write about women who are sluts?" I said, "Well, I wasn't aware that I do. But tell me what you mean by that." He said, "Well, here's that kid's mother and she's having an affair with another man." I said, "Is that what makes you think she's a slut?" He said, "Well, yeah." I said, "By that do you mean that you think she's a bad person?" He said, "She *is* a bad person." I went on to have a long talk with him about it, trying to tell him that the book was attempting to confront him on a serious subject, not just advocate some kind of conduct—though I had sympathy for the mother and didn't think she was a slut, if there are such things as sluts. But he just wouldn't have it. He wrote something nasty about me, and disparaging about the book. I wrote him a letter—the only such letter I've written—and said, "Shame on you. Of all the people in the world, the one who would be the most disappointed in you is not me, it's your mother." I thought maybe that would find a soft place in him. But in another way, if I wanted the book to confront him on that subject, and he rejected it, then the book failed. Pure and simple.

INTERVIEWER

Some questions in a totally different line: Do you think you're unusual as a writer in the way you move around?

FORD

I think I'm much more typical of Americans than I am atypical of Americans. I think Americans move around a lot for reasons which are not precisely like my reasons but not

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completely dissimilar either. They seek new experiences; they get bored; they see an opportunity, stuff like that.

INTERVIEWER

Wouldn't most Americans say that they move for jobs? That they have to move?

FORD

I think I move for my writing—at least, when I move, I also write.

INTERVIEWER

Some writers say that moving takes energy and time away from their writing.

FORD

Maybe so. But they probably use their not-writing time in some other way. You can't write *all* the time. What a drag. Other people I know—Bob Stone, Tom McGuane, Jim Harrison, Joy Williams, Ann Beattie—they all move around, or they have. Of course, you have to be *able* to do it, you can't be strapped down to a job. You have to have a certain amount of financial and emotional independence. My life sort of conforms to my bank account. I go where I can go. Maybe another reason I've moved around a lot is that I grew up in a sequestered part of the world—right in my middle in Mississippi. And I grew up curious about the rest of the country. Later on, when it came time for me to try to be a writer, I pretty quickly realized that I wasn't going to be able to write very much about the South because it had already been written about so well by all the greats and was still being written about wonderfully by Barry Hannah and Josephine Humphreys, Ellen Douglas and others; and that I was going to have to learn something else. And when I started learning those things I found I *could* learn, and that I could function elsewhere rather than being consigned physically, or as a writer to one part of the world where I wasn't comfortable. For a writing life to flourish, your mind has to go outwards.

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INTERVIEWER

What about the workplace?

FORD

I've written everywhere. I wrote a novella *The Womanizer* on a plane coming back from Paris. I've written in hotel rooms in Milan and Great Falls. I wrote a screenplay in the Chateau Marmont. I've worked in fifty rented houses, in friends' apartments. I like that, actually. It's a challenge to go into someplace that's not yours, and let the fact that you're doing important work there be the accommodating force. I don't think I could stay in one house continuously. I'm not contemplative enough, not interior enough, and that's another way of saying I'm probably not smart enough. I need a lot of external stimulation bulleting into my life. I'm not talking about exhilaration or thrill, I just want new sounds coming into my ears.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any place that you think of as home?

FORD

Mississippi. Unqualifiedly. Though I can't think why it would matter to anybody but me.

INTERVIEWER

Because your family lives there?

FORD

Because I was born there. And because I like it there. My mother, who died in 1981, was my last living close blood relative. And she'd moved from Mississippi back to Arkansas, her home, a few years before she died. So, after she died I felt that I no longer had a home that she determined and that I had questions to ask myself: Where are you from? Where do you live? Where are you going to claim to be your home? Arkansas was a possibility because I had spent years there and liked it. But Mississippi was the obvious place because that's where I was born and had gone to school. I love the landscape. I could deal with the people. Of course, then I got back there

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and I liked it so much it scared me to death. So, I sold the house and left after four years. It is one of the silliest mistakes of my life. Though, if we'd stayed I probably wouldn't have written *Wildlife*, and probably not *Independence Day*, which I'd personally regret, though of course I wouldn't know it.

INTERVIEWER

Have you got a house now?

FORD

I have a rented house in Greenwood, Mississippi, which I like a lot. Not as much as I liked the house I had before. But you know, I've been reading a lot of Auden recently. I'm not even a great fan of Auden's poems, but he's always trying to find good uses for his neuroses. He said that neurosis represented not necessarily a debility but an opportunity; that neurosis is a gift, something whose effects we can make use of in some inventive way. So when I think about not keeping that house, and God knows I've tried on several occasions to buy it back, I begin to think that, well, maybe I get more use out of *not* getting that house back than I ever would had I gotten it back and lived in it today. Maybe that longing for and avoidance of a place of my own has made me write stories. Who knows? That's also the Presbyterian in me—to look at things that happen as part of your fate. Kristina and I often go window-shopping. She'll see something that she wants, and I say, "Well, why do you want to buy it? There it is, you can see it. Take pleasure from *not* buying it."

INTERVIEWER

How did she like that?

FORD

She doesn't always see it my way.

INTERVIEWER

I wouldn't think she would.

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FORD

But I can take a certain amount of consolation in not having something, or in some forms of low-grade duress. I've had migraines for years, and long ago it began to be quite clear to me that having migraines was actually kind of benevolent, in one sense, anyway. Migraines are the ultimate neurotic Protestant's malady, because you get migraines often just at the point when terrible pressures are relieved, and you have every right to feel wonderful. It's as though some stern angel is hovering around you. And eventually if you don't kill yourself or go nuts, you begin to develop a rapport with your tormenter, and begin to consider what it's saving you from. Undue optimism, possibly.

INTERVIEWER

In the past you have said, "I was giving all my time away to somebody that I would never see again." What do you get from the process of teaching itself?"

FORD

I have to say that I got a lot from teaching when I was younger. I learned a huge amount about making stories—not so much from the students' work, but from using conversations about their work to articulate principles for myself that I could then "teach" to them. Teaching was very useful to me when I was in my middle thirties. But then I quit so I could write more.

INTERVIEWER

Do you get anything from your students?

FORD

I can't think of much that a student ever said to me except, "Can I get a grade change?" or "Can I put off having my story discussed Wednesday because I have to go to my father's marriage in Venezuela?" All I remember are the things I don't want to remember. But has a student ever come up to me and said something so blazingly true about which I thought to myself, "God, I wish I'd thought of that," like Wittgenstein used to do to his teachers? No. Not yet.

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INTERVIEWER

What is your advice to aspiring writers?

FORD

My first advice to an aspiring writer is to talk yourself out of it, if you can possibly do it.

INTERVIEWER

Why that?

FORD

Because you'll probably fail and make yourself miserable doing it. I feel about myself that I'm anomalous—a rare combination of fear, an affection for language, a reverence for literature, doggedness and good luck. Plus, I married the right girl. Shit, who's going to fall heir or victim to all those things?

INTERVIEWER

Was there ever a moment when you felt that it wasn't going to work?

FORD

All the time. Book to book or project to project it's always scary. I remember the first time in my life when I ever said I was a writer. Toby Wolff and I were going to London—me, for the first time, at age forty-two—and you had to make out one of those debarkation cards that asked your profession. Over the years, I'd always put "None" on any such questionnaire.

INTERVIEWER

None?

FORD

None. I didn't have one. I don't think of writing as a profession. I think of it as being a vocation. But I finally said, "Oh well, what the hell, you might as well put *writer*, because you aren't anything else. That's all you've done with your life and you're forty-two years old, and there isn't time to do anything

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else. And yet, even if I finally thought I was a writer, here I was heading into London, and though I had published two books and had a third finished, none were in print—I had nothing to show for being a writer when I was forty-two. So, what was that about things not working? Things can always not work. Eventually, I'm sure, that'll happen.

INTERVIEWER

What is the exhilaration of writing, if any?

FORD

Primarily, the chance to make something new, which might be good and beautiful, and which somebody else could use. For me, that's come to be the most important thing. Put most succinctly, to write for readers. I've never thought of writing as principally a way of learning about myself, or even as self-expression. Anybody who writes books learns a lot about himself just by seeing what his preoccupations are, what generosities he has or lacks, what his abilities are to invent something out of nothing. I never think about being a writer as being in any interesting way self-psychologizing. That just doesn't interest me.

INTERVIEWER

So you think of the reader when you are writing.

FORD

I wouldn't be a writer just for myself. If I were going to do something for myself, I'd do something else, something more practical and pleasurable, and probably easier.

INTERVIEWER

That's quite rare, I think.

FORD

I want to write, partly at least, for the kind of reader I was when I was nineteen years old. I want to address that person because he or she is young enough that life is just beginning

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to seem a mystery which literature can address in surprising and pleasurable ways. When I was nineteen I began to read *Absalom, Absalom!* slowly, slowly, page by patient page, since I was slightly dyslexic. I was working on the railroad, the Missouri-Pacific in Little Rock. I hadn't been doing well in school, but I started reading. I don't mean to say that reading altogether changed my life, but it certainly brought something into my life—possibility—that had not been there before.

INTERVIEWER

What was it about *Absalom, Absalom!*?

FORD

The language—a huge suffusing sea of wonderful words, made into beautiful, long paragraphs and put to the service of some great human conundrum it meant to console me about if not completely resolve. When I was old enough to think about myself as trying to be a writer, I always thought I would like to write a book and have it do that for someone else.

INTERVIEWER

An *Absalom, Absalom!* for some nineteen year old kid in Georgia.

FORD

Or Ohio. Or France. I heard someone say the other day, "You have to write for yourself." What shit, I thought. Write for yourself—why? (Though I guess if that produces wonderful work, who am I to argue over conceits?) But I once said that to an audience in France and several people got up and left the room. They said, "Hummmph. You're letting down your vocation if you're willing to admit that you write for other people." But that's just not my view. To me, it's the thought that you can make something out of words, which organizes experience in the way Faulkner is talking about when he says, "Literature stops life for the purpose of examining it." To be able to do that for another person is a good use of your life.

—**Bonnie Lyons**

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Alfred Corn

Philosophy

Beginning with a fundamental, which
Sounds tonic depths, then reasons up from there,
The will to truth parts company with prayer
Though both first come to being in a ditch.

Firm axioms advanced and bootstraps tugged
Aloft, it goes as high as we allow
Arguments to pass that don't quite follow,
While strict accounting daydreams as if drugged

On the tough beauty of the whole design,
And heretofore unruly percepts dance
The hidden measure within circumstance,
Mind at the dominant, in pure outline.

•

Nevertheless outside the door, second
Thoughts gather and, when qualified, approach
With mild petitions that no argument
Intent on simple justice can dismiss—
In fact, will find intriguing in themselves,

Fine distinctions that open a zigzag,
Ironic fracture in the system. Meanwhile,
An enharmonic corollary sings
Out, and its modulating emphasis
Makes of doubt a decent countercurrent

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Whose keenly passionate analysis
Shows where terms lose their meaning, catapulted
To the chill brink of the inconceivable,
Until thought stops going in that direction,
Direction itself having by then faded. . . .

•

The tone and tempo of tragedy surface
In a final discourse deep as abnegation:
True love of truth is unrequited love.
High up among towers on the crag of reason
Last fires die down and winter solstice dawns.
Nothing worth proving fails to gain distance

From falsehood by vigilant understatement,
The serious ruin a minor premise survives.
Once distilled, it will find a niche among
Those classic formulae fed to novices,
A bridge to the abbey across which stolid donkeys
Toil, bearing heavy reams of fresh parchment.

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Sarah Arvio

from Visits from the Seventh

I. Floating

I said something nonsensical to them
and they mocked back, "but we're your one design,"
or "you're our one design"—which was it?

The pen slipped and capered on the page,
escorted by ripplings in the atmosphere
like breeze blowing with nothing to blow against.

"We wear no form or figure of our own
—a wisp, a thread, a twig, a shred of smoke—
to tell us from the motions of the air.

We would love to live in even a bubble,
to wrap around its glossy diaphanous,
reaching and rounding, as slinkily real

as a morning stretch or a dance in a field.
But we know only this air, and memory,
once, or several times, removed and turned,

the pang of a once-had, a maybe-again,
that shifting half-light, our home and habitat,
those hours, soft-toned, windless, that favor passage,

the usual relay of twilights. And,
how often a century? The sun eclipsed,
that 'created' half-light, not dusk or dawn:

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us glowing through, our light, our element,
in which we show best, glow best, what we are.
Yesterday some snowflakes slipped through us,

refreshing kisses passing through our heat.
Ah, we wanted to say. If we could have,
we'd have laughed right out from sheer surprise."

And what else? "We've got you to stand for us."
And I have you, I said, to float for me.

II. How I Yearn

I had been missing them very badly,
that day and that day and the next—and yet
the solace they offered was imperfect,

airborne and volatile. I invoked them,
yes, often, in lieu of human contact.
Not that they weren't human, just abstracted

from humanness on the physical plane.
But why had they deserted me? I knew
the answer: for spurning them out of hand.

But where, in that case, did they swirl off to?
Did they rise higher, higher, and vanish
into some upper ether or did they

betrayingly visit someone else who
might at that moment seem more receptive?
Calling them back after a desertion

was never simple: I had to turn my mood
soft, bright, calm and dreamily attentive;
then, after a time, they would slip back in,

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one by one, refiguring their spirals
in those inevitable rows of seven.
Would they, I once found the courage to ask,

weave together and net the air for me,
linking and looping their remembered limbs,
to break softly my falling if I fell?

"Cradle me, oh cradle me," I whispered.
That was not a service they could do, though.
Life is so complicated for us here,

so troublesome, really, that I wondered
how they found theirs. Did they love it up there
cutting their spirals into cold fronts and

turning somersaults with the storms? Did they
nestle cozy into their troughs of air,
basking in the serene and glossy heights,

the breathtaking vistas of blue-gray seas,
the pink-tinted cloudscapes, the high music—
or did they, as we do, long for blankets

and warm bodies? So I broached that question
when they came soft-shoeing back in this time.
"No memory, no thought," they lipped to me,

"can stand in for the loss of a life of touch."
"Amen," I said, "and that's the life I want."
So I brushed the air to be rid of them.

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III. Denmark

"But how could you tell him? Never ever
have we allowed—have we intimated—
you should share our visits with anyone."
That's I think the gist of what one said.

"All territories have, never forget,
their own imperatives and covenants,
and the tacit ones. Under the so-called
presumption rule—that's Denmark—we presume

that the broader and deeper sovereignty,
crossing all lines, subsuming all bodies,
aquatic or abstract, will override
interior but lesser requisites."

I wanted to argue that telling him
was not so different from telling myself.
"Oh appeal, appeal, if you must," one said.
"We don't mind a hum, a word, a whisper

now and then, alluding to some other . . .
But outright revelation will only
imperil all that we've done, we and you,
to come to this arrangement—all the hours

at work before dawn in the North country,
the briny, eye-blue Baltic blustering
hard by, the sun rising to never more
than low in the sky, a cold yellow blur

gleaming dull in the iced *fourchettes* of trees."
So, was that all? Was that the sum of it?
Must I then keep mum or suggestive or
throw over all that they had been to me?

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"Stay, stay," I happened to hear one murmur.
A song sprang to mind: "Oh, Copenhagen,
wonderful . . . salty old queen of the sea . . ."
(Or some such.) They beamed, for they liked that thought.

IV. Death

Well, the night is blooming. Death may not be
(as the atheists would have it) nothing
at all, but rather (think many of us
who've abandoned god for a sense of god)

a moment to move through, on the other
side of which to find, no one knows, but more
than worms and darkness. For some, a power
almost to speak—although "speak" may not be

the term in the absence of lips, tongue, teeth.
"To say." By some means they implant their thoughts
into a person's mind. Mine, for instance.
And thus they go on growing and thriving.

At times they only seem to want to chat
or to make florid gestures, curves and sweeps
and curlicues—*esquisses*! Coy promises
—teases of a vision not to be had;

at others they seem to bud or burst forth
with words pushing to be said, and they nudge
and tickle me to say them for them. They're
working on the matter of openness—

not though, for its own sake, as a value,
but so that I'll be more fertile for them.
Not altogether a noble purpose—
but that depends on the nobility

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of the thought they're striving to cultivate.
Doesn't the wish to have one's thought thought of
seem vain, decorative? The lingering
effect of having lived well, maybe, and

not being able to leave it at that.
Always one stroke more to add: another
asterisk, addendum or afterword,
sprig after sprig, petal upon petal.

And if their thoughts are fine ones (most seem so
these nights) I don't mind helping them out by
letting them do their thinking in my thoughts.
Petals of promise; calyces of joy.

I like to fancy them as my teachers;
if they use me well, I may even learn
to use myself. And just now the room fills
with a fragrance of flowers. Or of love—

no, that isn't so. And yet, imagine
a garden, not wild but cultivated,
and richly fragrant. Yes, some spring flowers
turned in a breeze: that fresh, that rapturous.

V. A Flower

"Which ones?" And here they were, with me again,
slipping gently from this topic to that:
"Those for whom earthly senses are almost

not bearable, for whom a rough voice or
vile smell or small abrasion drawing blood
are racking or still worse. Those are the ones

living on the rim of Death, skirting it,
life being too lush, too real and too rich—
meaning, they're allotted too many nerves."

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"And for what? To please themselves, god only knows."
"But you can't have one without the other.
You can't be exquisitely pleasured and

not draw darker data through the senses."
There was the rub. They all laughed. We all laughed.
"And 'we all' know what too much pleasure is.

Or do we? (Paolo and Francesca knew)."
"The truest blessing to the sensitive
is not to live at all. How can a flower

be tolerated, for instance; maybe
it's too grand also, too great a rapture."
"There are many means of passing across,

including the taking of one's own death—
always a mistake viewed from either side."
"The tragedy of course is multifold,

the ones left behind weeping and helpless,
and the departed who must pass forward
through the stations, not having satisfied

a central moment of his destiny—
arduous passage." "For the extra-sensed
are tasked, you know, with negotiating

the difficult domain of the Divide."
I was tired then from too many such truths,
so I said good night, and I retreated.

VI. Moon-Gazing

And here now again: it didn't matter,
or did it, whether life's shifting layers
were "collateral or coterminous";

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what was essential was to "look ahead
lightly"—"so very lightly"—and to "fuss
pleasantly over the moment's pleasures"

"without religion and without regret."
For that was all there was. "*Now is ever.*"
And with this *mot*, a beam of light streamed in,

a soft moonstripe or a neighboring lamp
through whose shine pranced the palest acrobats,
willful almost wanton and expressing

pure contentment at their own fine fact: *now*
is ever. Wasn't that really the "text
and texture of the higher life?" (This time

not excluding the sex organs.) High means
exquisitely sensed or extra-sensed? "Yes."
I've asked them but they haven't told me yet

how they sense without the senses. Oh yes,
the sixth sense, I had forgotten that one.
I feel them humming and clucking gently:

"The sixth is sex, silly. The *seventh* is
our sense, the one we sometimes share with you."
(This was a common but crucial error.)

But then how did they gather theirs of us?
I wanted to know so I pressed and pressed.
"Some, dear, have talked of seeing through the backs

of mirrors. And so it is, or almost so.
We live—'reside,' that is—on the far side
of the moon, watching it in negative

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against the light of the sun. Do you see?
Dark moon in a sea of light. Oh to us
almost as wonderful and less like cheese."

VII. Temptation

I do know the temptation to beg them
to read me the future or to read me
the present so I can parse the future;

and though they may seem to *clair-voient* my mind,
should I trust them to see someone else's?
If they said, "you are the life of his heart,"

if they hummed, "he is yours, now and ever,"
or, "after this hour, he will come to you,"
what if they visioned there not the true thought

but the self-deceit or the subterfuge
and then sang back those thoughts to me? And I
lived my life led by those misreadings?

And what if I said, as I know I did,
where is he now? And they said back "China"?
What China then? A China of the mind,

"mandarin and yes, multifarious,"
where a hex means merely a hexagram,
where a wild goose perching on a bare branch

means barren love. Well, was that our China?
Love that I desire return to me
and the change read, "noblehearted return,"

and return means merely "turning again";
"return from a short distance," read the change.
How far had we gone, how far would we come?

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Was that then what our China would be?
"The number of sticks is six, the number
for sex, and thus the number of changing."

"Yes, well, sex *is* a danger to the soul:
it wounds the soul and therefore changes it.
The chaste are always wrong. For sex is change

and change is the essence of everything . . ."
You see? Such mediumistic moments
were fraught with bad turns, missteps and false hopes.

VIII. Cancer

Were they speaking of chemotherapy?
(JM reported that it split the soul.)
Oh? To live one life and not another,

and pass, how? "Shattered in a thousand shards."
I think it must feel like psychosis then.
"The soft wavering balloon of the self

flying in myriad loose flying bits.
Terrifying. Some thoughts this way, some that.
A memory here, a thought over there—

the circle at the center, gone." What would
I do if faced with such a hopeless hope?
I would wish to be moved to pass across

with my soul intact, or to turn to prayer,
or to seek the secret at the crisis
of the splitting of cells. "Would you call it

the demon's foot, the kernel of the fact,
the secret *dolor*, the seed of the seed
sleeping in the garden of memory,

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lying in the hothouse of banished thoughts?"
"Would you call it the thorn, the buried pea
that bruised the perfect skin of the princess?"

"The brute instant or the prolonged trauma?"
"And what, after all, will waking it do?
"Will it kiss away the little one's tears,

will it delete the image, frame by frame,
back to the moment when the day turned wrong?"
"No, probably not, no, certainly not."

"Will it reconceive the deforming cells?"
"Oh, possibly." Was that superstition
or faith? And here the pen slowed audibly:

"Yes, faith in the awful heart of the fact.
Blind believing but in nothing but that.
Irreligious but oh reverential."

IX. Static Interference

This one, for instance, just said (I heard him
through a screen of static or scraping wind—
was it the scratch of the pen on the page?),

"Shun that small soul. Shun that small-natured soul.
Avoid mediocrity at all cost."
This was, yes, "improper interference."

"It's really only the new departures
who want, having just left, to intervene,
driven by the onset of new vision."

And "oh alas, in the time of passage
can they be dissuaded? For they haven't
yet grasped the futility of trying

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to spare you your plight, your purpose, your oh
so necessary struggles and strivings.
For without them what would life be? As good . . .

as good as . . ." (here he fumbled and broke off,
mawkishly humming) ". . . oh useless to know . . .
oh love your sweet tears." And into the room

flew the sense of a dark song and a throng
of flutters or rustles—were they whispers
or were they soft wings, oh paler than air,

or merely the sense of the sound of them,
and the sound was as waves lapping, laughing,
the sound was as forests ruffled by wind.

And here now again, urgently pressing:
"Waste your talents on that constricting soul
for the love of a spot of affection?

Do you hope to exalt him? Watch how he
tries to count and control you, watch how he
wants to enclose you." And then this other:

"In time (or out of it) we learn to quell
our frustration, to turn our thoughts elsewhere
(I nearly said 'our minds'—how utterly

we are moved to speak your language to you)
toward the outer worlds. Oh yes, so high-flown
these words I know. But a fact is a fact."

X. Malice

There are ones out there as false as any
(a 42nd Street of the Heavens),
gypsies and fantasists, con men and creeps:
if you're unbefriended they can steal in

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at any hour under any pretext,
wanting you to believe in their goodwill
while secretly witching for your downfall.
They're envious, being those least gifted

or those who mismanaged their gifts in life,
so they can't come around honoring or
answer to honor they couldn't merit.
But do they ask themselves why not, and work

upwards from there? No. After all that time
cavorting idle across the skyscape,
pink, pellucid and cloud-streaked (that alone
should be enough to arouse them to praise),

and grousing about what they didn't do,
they *want* to see you injured or chagrined,
so they can chortle and vent their failure.
An ever-so-alluring deceiver

is the one who tells you your every dream
as though it were the truth of the future;
meanwhile there you stand in a wash of sweat
your hopes lifted high only to be dashed,

and hear him later laughing fit to burst
and posturing as thunder or traffic.
They *are* hard to tell, by this medium,
from the grand and good ones (but how like life!)

because of course they really can't be seen
and that makes telling an arduous task,
so Helen-Keller-like in its demand
for varieties of subtle nuance.

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XI. Rêves d'or

"The surest bet is to take no counsel
but to love notions in the mere abstract;
to hear 'us' as you would hear anyone,

intrigued by the form of the idea
and maybe the manner of the telling
but never taking it as gospel truth."

"And let's not start now with this silliness
of what-does-it-matter-since-fate-prevails:
for you *do* stand there in the yellow wood

and must choose between two diverging paths,
or many paths diverging from a point,
starting now and moving into ever."

"Most of us never begin to assess
the infinite ways we never followed,
various in essence and variform,

a vast web of eventualities
traced negative on the verso of life:
verging, converging and parting again,

or radiating from a single verb,
never ever to return or to meet."
Was it the yellow of the green spring growth,

was it the yellow of the changing leaves,
of summer sun flaming in foliage
and burning the wishbones of the branches?

Was it the rubbed round of the winter sun
lacquering a glare on the frozen snow,
or was it the yellow Indian silk

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I wore the last time you made love to me?
The yellow of piss, the refracted rays
in the nubs of the white angora's eyes,

or the yellow of fear—were those woods fear?
Which yellow was it? It was "all of these."
It was the "yellow of your yellow hair."

But this eludes the question of counsel.
This evades—*n'est-ce pas?*—the valence of choice.

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Labyrinthine

Bernard Cooper

When I discovered my first maze among the pages of a coloring book, I dutifully guided the mouse in the margins toward his wedge of cheese at the center. I dragged my crayon through narrow alleys and around corners, backing out of dead ends, trying this direction instead of that. Often I had to stop and rethink my strategy, squinting until some unobstructed path became clear and I could start to move the crayon again.

I kept my sights on the small chamber in the middle of the page and knew that being lost would not be in vain; wrong turns only improved my chances, showed me that one true path toward my reward. Even when trapped in the hallways of the maze, I felt an embracing safety, as if I'd been zipped in a sleeping bag.

Reaching the cheese had about it a triumph and finality I'd never experienced after coloring a picture or connecting the dots. If only I'd known a word like *inevitable*, since that's how it felt to finally slip into the innermost room. I gripped the crayon, savored the place.

The lines on the next maze in the coloring book curved and rippled like waves on water. The object of this maze was

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to lead a hungry dog to his bone. Mouse to cheese, dog to bone—the premise quickly ceased to matter. It was the tricky, halting travel I was after, forging a passage, finding my way.

Later that day, as I walked through our living room, a maze revealed itself to me in the mahogany coffee table. I sat on the floor, fingered the wood grain and found a winding avenue through it. The fabric of my parents' blanket was a pattern of climbing ivy and, from one end of the bed to the other, I traced the air between the tendrils. Soon, I didn't need to use a finger, mapping my path by sight. I moved through the veins of the marble hearth, through the space between the paisleys on my mother's blouse. At the age of seven I changed forever, like the faithful who see Christ on the side of a barn or peering up from a corn tortilla. Everywhere I looked, a labyrinth meandered.

Soon, the mazes in coloring books, in the comic-strip section of the Sunday paper or on the placemats of coffee shops that served "children's meals," became too easy. And so I began to make my own. I drew them on the cardboard rectangles that my father's dress shirts were folded around when they came back from the cleaner's. My frugal mother, hoarder of jelly jars and rubber bands, had saved a stack of them. She was happy to put the cardboard to use, if a bit mystified by my new obsession.

The best method was to start from the center and work outward with a sharpened pencil, creating layers of complication. I left a few gaps in every line, and after I'd gotten a feel for the architecture of the whole, I'd close off openings, reinforce walls, a slave sealing the pharaoh's tomb. My blind alleys were especially treacherous; I constructed them so that, by the time one realized he'd gotten stuck, turning back would be an exquisite ordeal.

My hobby required a twofold concentration: carefully planning a maze while allowing myself the fresh pleasure of moving through it. Alone in my bedroom, sitting at my desk, I sometimes spent the better part of an afternoon on a single maze. I worked with the patience of a redwood growing rings. Drawing

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myself into corners, erasing a wall if all else failed, I fooled and baffled and freed myself.

Eventually, I used shelf paper, tearing off larger and larger sheets to accommodate my burgeoning ambition. Once, I brought a huge maze to my mother who was drinking a cup of coffee in the kitchen. It wafted behind me like an ostentatious cape. I draped it over the table and challenged her to try it. She hadn't looked at it for more than a second before she refused. "You've got to be kidding," she said, blotting her lips with a paper napkin. "I'm lost enough as it is." When my father returned from work that night, he hefted his briefcase into the closet, his hat wet and drooping from the rain. "Later," he said (his code word for "never") when I waved the banner of my labyrinth before him.

It was inconceivable to me that someone wouldn't want to enter a maze, wouldn't lapse into the trance it required, wouldn't sacrifice the time to find a solution. But mazes had a strange effect on my parents: they took one look at those tangled paths and seemed to wilt.

I was a late child, a "big surprise" as my mother liked to say; by the time I'd turned seven, my parents were trying to cut a swath through the forest of middle age. Their mortgage ballooned. The plumbing rusted. Old friends grew sick or moved away. The creases in their skin deepened, so complex a network of lines, my mazes paled by comparison. Father's hair receded, Mother's grayed. "When you've lived as long as we have . . . ," they'd say, which meant no surprises loomed in their future; it was repetition from here on out. The endless succession of burdens and concerns was enough to make anyone forgetful. Eggs were boiled until they turned brown, sprinklers left on till the lawn grew soggy, keys and glasses and watches misplaced. When I asked my parents about their past, they cocked their heads, stared into the distance and often couldn't recall the details.

Thirty years later, I understand my parent's refusal. Why would anyone choose to get mired in a maze when the days encase us, loopy and confusing? Remembered events merge

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together, or fade away. Places and dates grow dubious, a jumble of guesswork and speculation. *What's-his-name* and *thing-a-ma-jig* replace the bright particular. Recollecting the past becomes as unreliable as forecasting the future; you consult yourself with a certain trepidation and take your answer with a grain of salt. The friends you turn to for confirmation are just as muddled; they furrow their brows and look at you blankly. Of course, once in a while you find the tiny, pungent details poised on your tongue like caviar. But more often than not, you settle for sloppy approximations—"I was visiting Texas or Colorado, in nineteen seventy-one or two"—and the anecdote rambles on regardless. When the face of a friend from childhood suddenly comes back to me, it's sad to think that, if a certain synapse hadn't fired just then, I may never have recalled that friend again. Sometimes I'm not sure if I've overheard a story in conversation, read it in a book or if I'm the person to whom it happened; whose adventures, besides my own, are wedged in my memory? Then there are the things I've dreamed and mistaken as fact. When you've lived as long as I have, uncertainty is virtually indistinguishable from the truth, which as far as I know is never naked, but always wearing some disguise.

Mother, Father: I'm growing middle-aged, lost in the folds and bones of my body. It gets harder to remember the days when you were here. I suppose it was inevitable that, gazing down at this piece of paper, I'd feel your weary expressions on my face. What have things been like since you've been gone? Labyrinthine. The very sound of that word sums it up—as slippery as thought, as perplexing as the truth, as long and convoluted as a life.

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Portfolio

from The View from the Bottom of the Well

Louise Bourgeois

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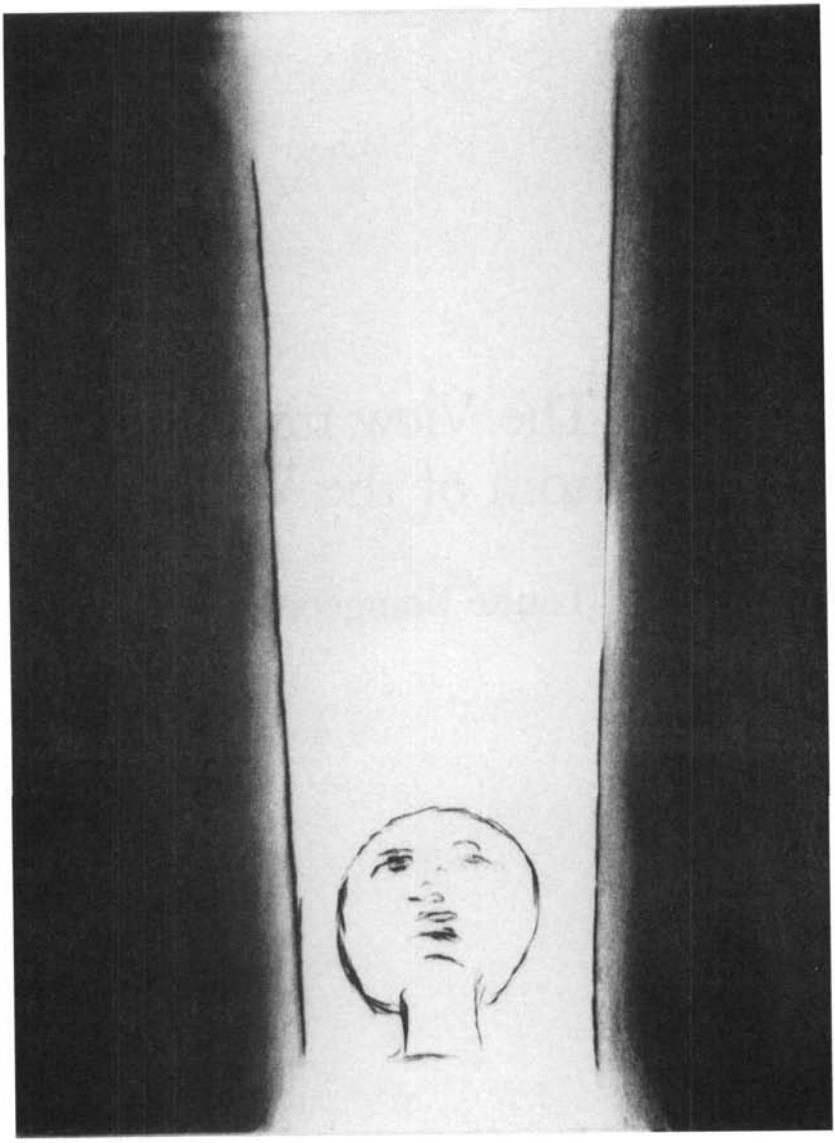

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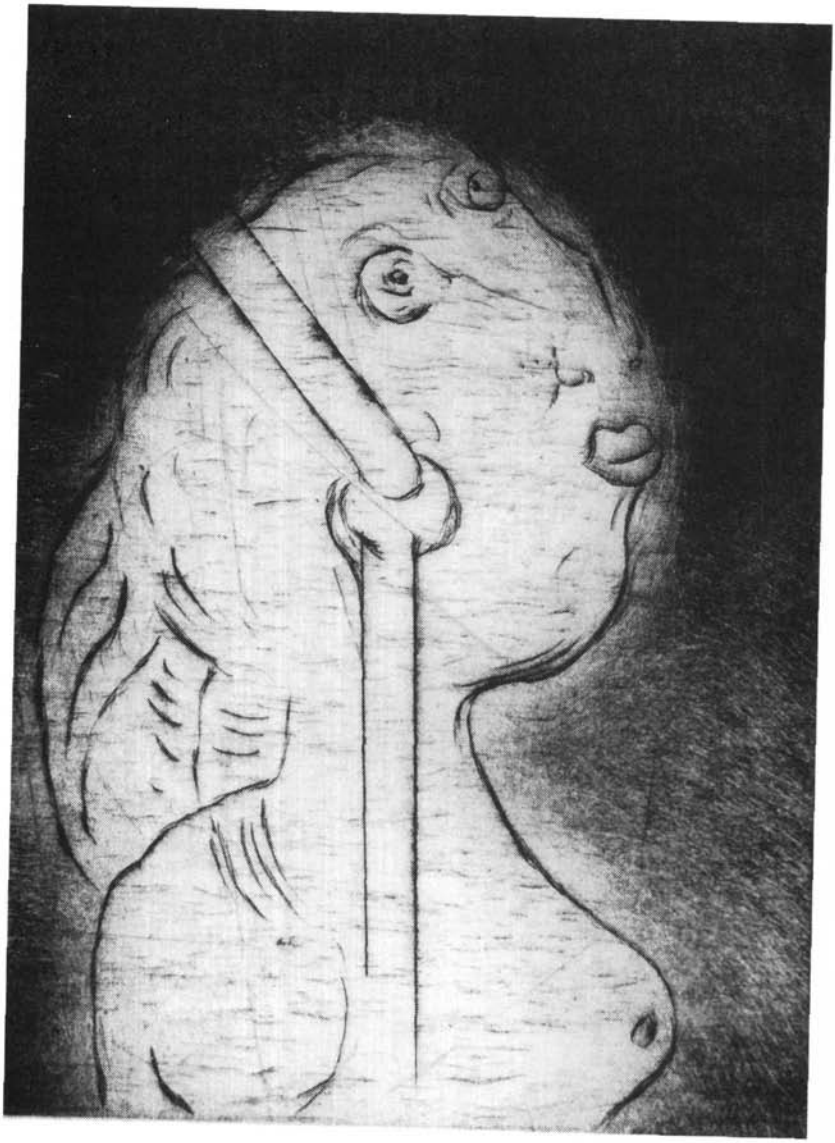

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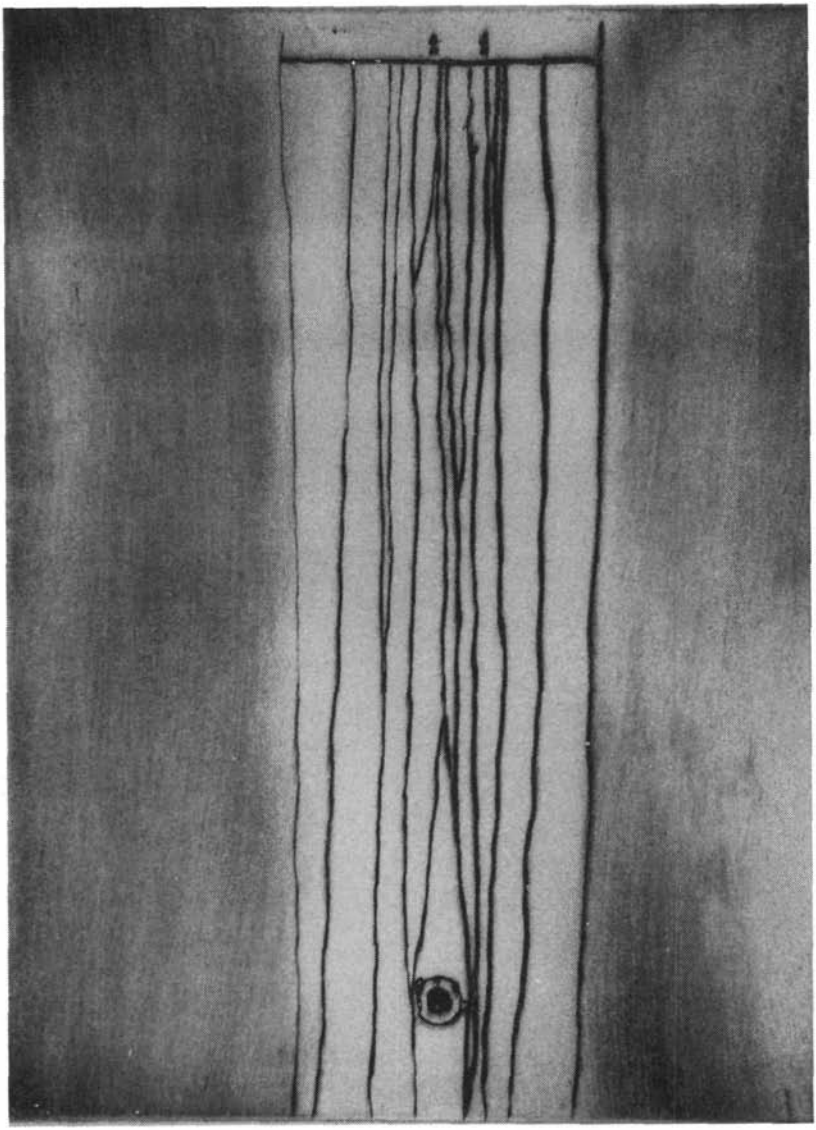

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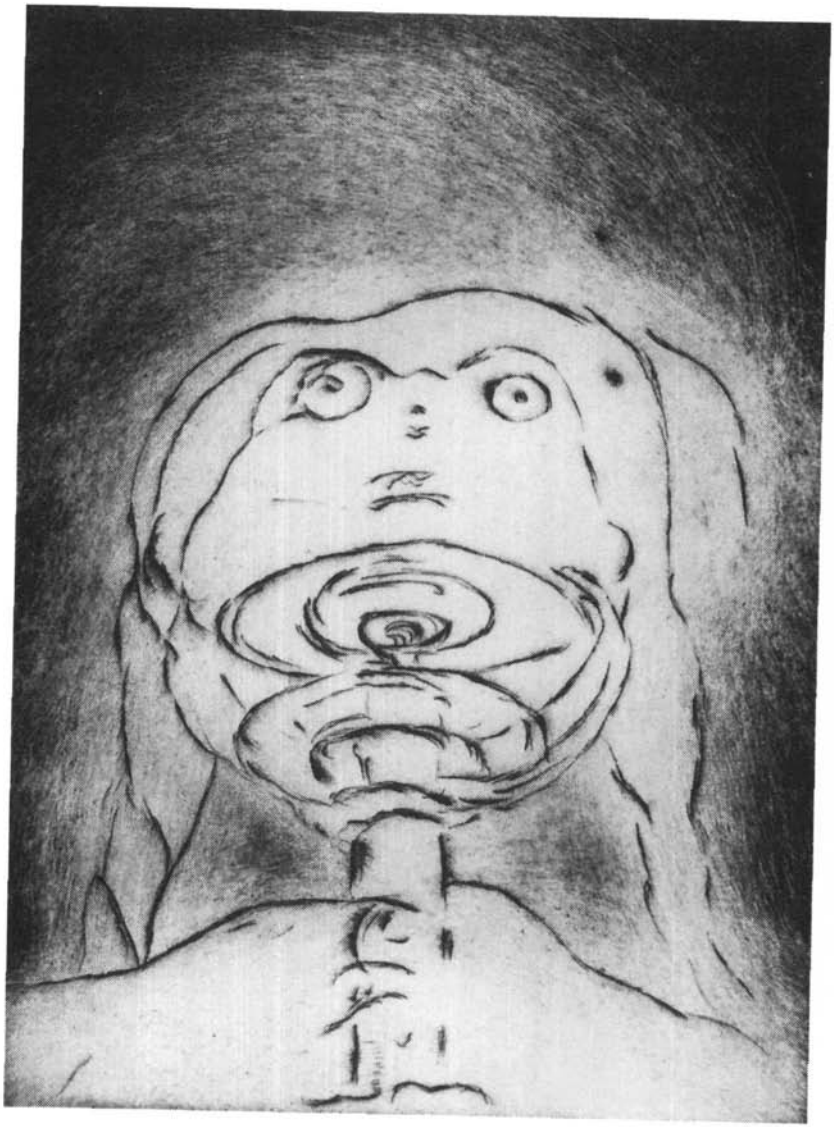

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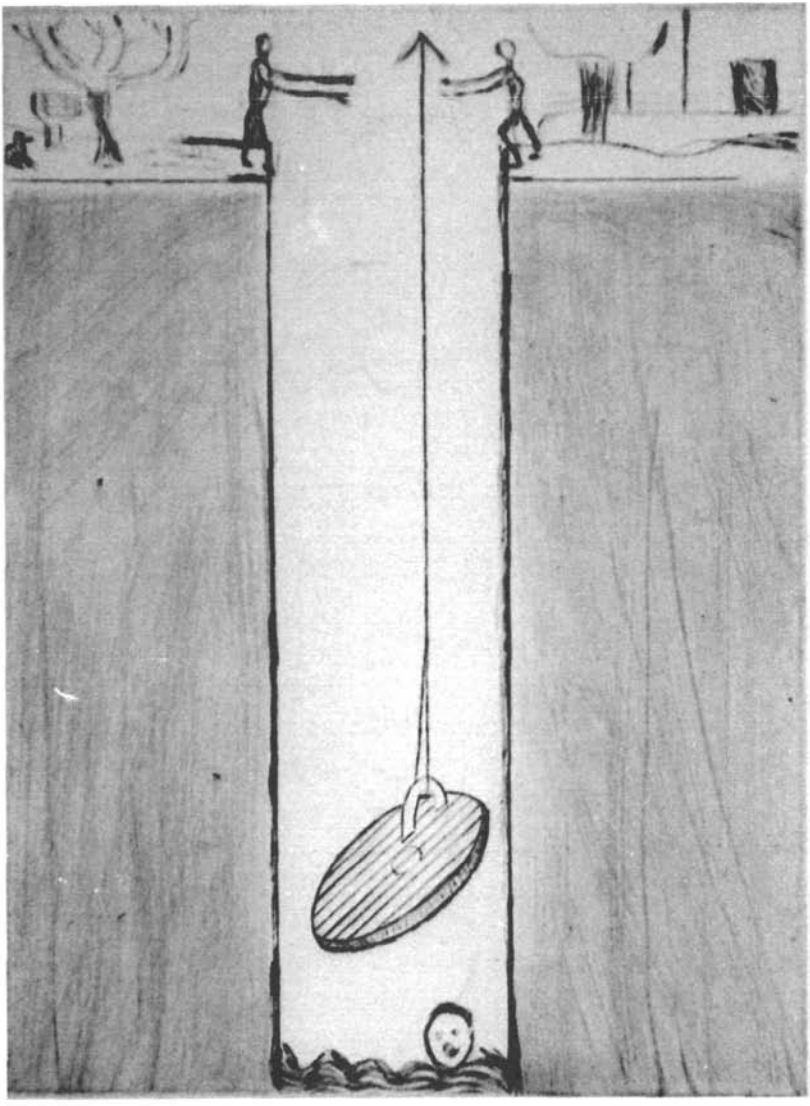

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"Help Me Find My Spaceman Lover"

Robert Olen Butler

I never thought I could fall for a spaceman. I mean, you see them in the newspaper and they kind of give you the willies, all skinny and hairless and wiggly-looking, and if you touched one, even to shake hands, you just know it would be like when you were about fifteen and you were with an earth boy and you were sweet on him but there was this thing he wanted, and you finally said okay, but only rub-a-dub, which is what we called it around these parts when I was younger, and it was the first time ever that you touched . . . well, you know what I'm talking about. Anyway, that's what it's always seemed like to me with spacemen, and most everybody around here feels about the same way, I'm sure. Folks in Bovary, Alabama, and environs—by which I mean the KOA camp off the interstate and the new trailer park out past the quarry—everybody in Bovary is used to people being a certain way, to look at and to talk to and so forth. Take my daddy. When I showed him a few years ago in the newspaper how a spaceman had endorsed Bill Clinton for president and they

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had a picture of a spaceman standing there next to Bill Clinton—without any visible clothes on, by the way—the spaceman, that is, not Bill Clinton, though I wouldn't put it past him, to tell the truth, and I'm not surprised at anything they might do over in Little Rock. But I showed my daddy the newspaper and he took a look at the spaceman and he snorted and said that he wasn't surprised people like that was supporting the Democrats, people like that don't even look American, and I said no, Daddy, he's a spaceman, and he said people like that don't even look human, and I said no, Daddy, he's not human, and my daddy said, that's what I'm saying, make him get a job.

But I did fall for a spaceman, as it turned out, fell pretty hard. I met him in the parking lot at the twenty-four-hour Wal-Mart. We used to have a regular old Wal-Mart that would close at nine o'clock and when they turned it into a Super Center a lot of people in Bovary thought that no good would come of it, encouraging people to stay up all night. Americans go to bed early and get up early, my daddy said. But I have trouble sleeping sometimes. I live in the old trailer park out the state highway and it's not too far from the Wal-Mart and I live there with my yellow cat Eddie. I am forty years old and I was married once, to a telephone installer who fell in love with cable TV. There's no cable TV in Bovary yet, though with a twenty-four-hour Wal-Mart, it's probably not too far behind. It won't come soon enough to save my marriage, however. Not that I wanted it to. He told me he just *had* to install cable TV, telephones wasn't fulfilling him, and he was going away for good to Mobile and he didn't want me to go with him, this was the end for us, and I was understanding the parts about it being the end but he was going on about fiber optics and things that I didn't really follow. So I said fine and he went away, and even if he'd wanted me to go with him, I wouldn't have done it. I've only been to Mobile a couple of times and I didn't take to it. Bovary is just right for me. At least that's what I thought when it had to do with my ex-husband, and that kind of thinking just stayed with me, like a grape-juice stain on your housedress, and I am full

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of regrets, I can tell you, for not rethinking that whole thing before this. But I got a job at a hairdresser's in town and Daddy bought me the trailer free and clear and me and Eddie moved in and I just kept all those old ideas.

So I met Desi in the parking lot. I called him that because he talked with a funny accent but I liked him. I had my insomnia and it was about three in the morning and I went to the twenty-four-hour Wal-Mart and I was glad it was there and it was open—I'd tell that right to the face of anybody in this town—I was glad for a place to go when I couldn't sleep. So I was coming out of the store with a bag that had a little fuzzy mouse toy for Eddie, made of rabbit fur, I'm afraid, and that strikes me as pretty odd to kill all those cute little rabbits, which some people have as pets and love a lot, so that somebody else's pet of a different type can have something to play with, and it's that kind of odd thing that makes you shake your head about the way life is lived on planet Earth—Desi has helped me see things in the larger perspective—though, to be honest, it didn't stop me from buying the furry cat toy, because Eddie does love those things. Maybe today I wouldn't do the same, but I wasn't so enlightened that night when I came out of the Wal-Mart and I had that toy and some bread and baloney and a refrigerator magnet, which I collect, of a zebra head.

He was standing out in the middle of the parking lot and he wasn't moving. He was just standing still as a cow and there wasn't any car within a hundred feet of him, and, of course, his spaceship wasn't anywhere in sight, though I wasn't looking for that right away because at first glance I didn't know he was a spaceman. He was wearing a long black trench coat with the belt cinched tight and he had a black felt hat with a wide brim. Those were the things I saw first and he seemed odd, certainly, dressed like that in Bovary, but I took him for a human being, at least.

I was opening my car door and he was still standing out there and I called out to him, "Are you lost?"

His head turns my way and I still can't see him much at all except as a hat and a coat.

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"Did you forget where you parked your car?" I say, and then right away I realize there isn't but about four cars total in the parking lot at that hour. So I put the bag with my things in the seat and I come around the back of the car and go a few steps toward him. I feel bad. So I call to him, kind of loud because I'm still pretty far away from him and also because I already have a feeling he might be a foreigner. I say, "I wasn't meaning to be snippy, because that's something that happens to me a lot and I can look just like you look sometimes, I'm sure, standing in the lot wondering where I am, exactly."

While I'm saying all this I'm moving kind of slow in his direction. He isn't saying anything back and he isn't moving. But already I'm noticing that his belt is cinched *very* tight, like he's got maybe an eighteen-inch waist. And as I get near, he sort of pulls his hat down to hide his face, but already I'm starting to think he's a spaceman.

I stop. I haven't seen a spaceman before except in the newspaper and I take another quick look around, just in case I missed something, like there might be four cars *and* a flying saucer. But there's nothing unusual. Then I think, oh my, there's one place I haven't looked, and so I lift my eyes, very slow because this is something I don't want to see all the sudden, and finally I'm staring into the sky. It's a dark night and there are a bunch of stars up there and I get goose bumps because I'm pretty sure that this man standing just a few feet away is from somewhere out there. But at least there's no spaceship as big as the Wal-Mart hanging over my head with lights blinking and transporter beams ready to shine down on me. It's only stars.

So I bring my eyes down—just about as slow—to look at this man. He's still there. And in the shadow of his hat brim, with the orangey light of the parking lot all around, I can see these eyes looking at me now and they are each of them about as big as Eddie's whole head and shaped kind of like Eddie's eyes.

"Are you a spaceman?" I just say this right out.

"Yes, ma'am," he says and his courtesy puts me at ease

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right away. Americans are courteous, my daddy says, not like your Eastern liberal New York taxi drivers.

"They haven't gone and abandoned you, have they, your friends or whoever?" I say.

"No, ma'am," he says and his voice is kind of high-pitched and he has this accent, but it's more in the tone of the voice than how he says his words, like he's talking with a mouth full of grits or something.

"You looked kind of lost, is all."

"I am waiting," he says.

"That's nice. They'll be along soon, probably," I say, and I feel my feet starting to slide back in the direction of the car. There's only so far that courtesy can go in calming you down. The return of the spaceship is something I figure I can do without.

Then he says, "I am waiting for you, Edna Bradshaw."

"Oh. Good. Sure, honey. That's me. I'm Edna. Yes. Waiting for me." I'm starting to babble and I'm hearing myself like I was hovering in the air over me and I'm wanting my feet to go even faster but they seem to have stopped altogether. I wonder if it's because of some tractor beam or something. Then I wonder if they have tractor beam pulling contests in outer space that they show on TV back in these other solar systems. I figure I'm starting to get hysterical, thinking things like that in a situation like this, but there's not much I can do about it.

He seems to know I'm struggling. He takes a tiny little step forward and his hand goes up to his hat, like he's going to take it off and hold it in front of him as he talks to me, another courtesy that even my daddy would appreciate. But his hand stops. I think he's not ready to show me his whole spaceman head. He knows it would just make things worse. His hand is bad enough, hanging there over his hat. It's got little round pads at the end of the fingers, like a gecko, and I don't stop to count them, but at first glance there just seems to be too many of them.

His hand comes back down. "I do not hurt you, Edna Bradshaw, I am a friendly guy."

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"Good," I say. "Good. I figured that was so when I first saw you. Of course, you can just figure somebody around here is going to be friendly. That's a good thing about Bovary, Alabama—that's where you are, you know, though you probably do know that, though maybe not. Do you know that?"

He doesn't say anything for a moment. I'm rattling on again, and it's true I'm a little bit scared and that's why, but it's also true that I'm suddenly very sad about sounding like this to him, I'm getting some perspective on myself through his big old eyes, and I'm sad I'm making a bad impression because I want him to like me. He's sweet, really. Very courteous. Kind of boyish. And he's been waiting for me.

"Excuse me," he says. "I have been translating. You speak many words, Edna Bradshaw. Yes, I know the name of this place."

"I'm sorry. I just do that sometimes, talk a lot. Like when I get scared, which I am a little bit right now. And call me Edna."

"Please," he says, "I am calling you Edna already. And in conclusion, you have no reason to be afraid."

"I mean call me *just* Edna. You don't have to say Bradshaw every time, though my granddaddy would do that with people. He was a fountain pen salesman and he would say to people, I'm William D. Bradshaw. Call me William D. Bradshaw. And he meant it. He wanted you to say the whole name every time. But you can just call me Edna."

So the spaceman takes a step forward and my heart starts to pound something fierce, and it's not from fright, I realize, though it's some of that. "Edna," he says. "You are still afraid."

"Telling you about my granddaddy, you mean? How that's not really the point here? Well, yes, I guess so. Sometimes, if he knew you for awhile, he'd let you call him W.D. Bradshaw."

Now his hand comes up and it clutches the hat and the hat comes off and there he stands in the orange lights of the parking lot at three in the morning in my little old hometown and he doesn't have a hair on his head, though I've always liked bald men and I've read they're bald because they have so much male hormone in them, which makes them the best

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lovers, which would make this spaceman quite a guy, I think, and his head is pointy, kind of, and his cheeks are sunken and his cheekbones are real clear and I'm thinking already I'd like to bake some cookies for him or something, just last week I got a prize-winning recipe off a can of cooking spray that looks like it'd put flesh on a fence post. And, of course, there are these big eyes of his and he blinks once, real slow, and I think it's because he's got a strong feeling in him, and he says, "Edna, my name is hard for you to say."

And I think of Desi right away, and I try it on him, and his mouth, which hasn't got anything that look like lips exactly, moves up at the edges and he makes this pretty smile.

"I have heard that name," he says. "Call me Desi. And I am waiting for you, Edna, because I study this planet and I hear you speak many words to your friends and to your subspecies companion and I detect some bright-colored aura around you and I want to meet you."

"That's good," I say, and I can feel a blush starting in my chest, where it always starts, and it's spreading up my throat and into my cheeks.

"I would like to call on you tomorrow evening, if I have your permission," he says.

"Boy," I say. "Do a lot of people have the wrong idea about spacemen. I thought you just grabbed somebody and beamed them up and that was it." It was a stupid thing to say, I realize right away. I think Desi looks a little sad to hear this. The corners of his mouth sink. "I'm sorry," I say.

"No," he says. "This is how we are perceived, it is true. You speak only the truth. This is one reason I want to meet you, Edna. You seem always to say what is inside your head without any attempt to alter it."

Now it's my turn to look a little sad, I think. But that's okay, because it gives me a chance to find out that Desi is more than courteous. His hands come out toward me at once, the little suckers on them primed to latch onto me, and I'm not even scared because I know it means he cares about me. And he's too refined to touch me this quick. His hands just

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hang there between us and he says, "I speak this not as a researcher but as a male creature of a parallel species."

"You mean as a man?"

His eyes blink again, real slow. "Yes. As a man. As a man I try to say that I like the way you speak."

So I give him permission to call on me and he thanks me and he turns and glides away. I know his legs are moving but he glides, real smooth, across the parking lot and I can see now that poor Desi didn't even find a pair of pants and some shoes to go with his trench coat. His legs and ankles are skinny like a frog's and his feet look a lot like his hands. But all that is unclear on the first night. He has disappeared out into the darkness and I drive on home to my subspecies companion and I tell him all about what happened while he purrs in my lap and I have two thoughts.

First, if you've never seen a cat in your entire life or anything like one and then meet a cat in a Wal-Mart parking lot in the middle of the night all covered with fur and making this rumbling noise and maybe even smelling of mouse meat, you'd have to make some serious adjustments to what you think is pretty and sweet and something you can call your own. Second—and this hits me with a little shock—Desi says he's been hearing how I talk to my friends and even to Eddie, and that sure wasn't by hanging around in his trench coat and blending in with the furniture. Of course, if you've got a spaceship that can carry you to earth from a distant galaxy, it's not so surprising you've got some kind of radio or something that lets you listen to what everybody's saying without being there.

And when I think of this, I start to sing for Desi. I just sit for a long while where I am, with Eddie in my lap, this odd little creature that doesn't look like me at all but who I find cute as can be and who I love a lot, and I sing, because when I was a teenager I had a pretty good voice and I even thought I might be a singer of some kind, though there wasn't much call for that in Bovary except in the church choir, which is where I sang mostly, but I loved to sing other kinds of songs too. And so I say real loud, "This is for you, Desi." And then

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I sing every song I can think of. I sing "The Long and Winding Road" and "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" and "Everything is Beautiful" and a bunch of others, some twice, like "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face." Then I do a Reba McEntire medley and I start with "Is There Life Out There" and then I do "Love Will Find Its Way to You" and "Up to Heaven" and "Long Distance Lover." I sing my heart out to Desi and I have to say this surprises me a little but maybe it shouldn't because already I'm hearing myself through his ears—though at that moment I can't even say for sure if he had ears—and I realize that a lot of what I say, I say because it keeps me from feeling so lonely.

The next night there's a knock on my door and I'm wearing my best dress, with a scoop neck and it shows my cleavage pretty good and on the way to the door I suddenly doubt myself. I don't know if spacemen are like earthmen in that way or not. Maybe they don't appreciate a good set of knockers, especially if their women are as skinny as Desi. But I am who I am. So I put all that out of my mind and I open the door and there he is. He's got his black felt hat on, pulled down low in case any of my neighbors are watching, I figure, and he's wearing a gray pinstripe suit that's way too big for him and a white shirt and a tie with a design that's dozens of little Tabasco bottles floating around.

"Oh," I say. "You like hot food?"

This makes him stop and try to translate.

"Your tie," I say. "Don't you know about your tie?"

He looks down and lifts the end of the tie and looks at it for a little while and he is so cute doing that and so innocent-like that my heart is doing flips and I kind of wiggle in my dress a bit to make him look at who it is he's going out with. If the women on his planet are skinny, then he could be real real ready for a woman like me. That's how I figure it as I'm waiting there for him to check out his tie and be done with it, though I know it's my own fault for getting him off on that track, and me doing that is just another example of something or other.

Then Desi looks up at me, and he takes off his hat with

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one hand and I see that he doesn't have anything that looks like ears, really, just sort of a little dip on each side where ears might be. But that doesn't make him so odd. What's an ear mean, really? Having an ear or not having an ear won't get you to heaven, it seems to me. I look into Desi's big dark eyes and he blinks slow and then his other hand comes out from behind his back and he's got a flower for me that's got a bloom on it the color of I don't know what, a blue kind of, a red kind of, and I know this is a spaceflower of some sort and I take it from him and it weighs about as much as my Sunbeam Steam Iron, just this one flower.

He says, "I heard you sing for me," and he holds out his hand. If you want to know an exact count, there's eight fingers on each hand, I will end up counting them carefully later on our date, but for now there's still just a lot of fingers and I realize I'm not afraid of them anymore and I reach out to him and the little suckers latch on all over my hand, top and bottom, and it's like he's kissing me in eight different places there, over and over, they hold on to me and they pulse in each spot they touch, maybe with the beat of his heart. It's like that. And my eyes fill up with tears because this man's very fingertips are in love with me, I know.

And then he leads me to his flying saucer, which is pretty big but not as big as I imagined, not as big as all of Wal-Mart, certainly, maybe just the pharmacy and housewares departments put together. It's parked out in the empty field back of my trailer where they kept saying they'd put in a miniature golf course and they never did and you don't even see the saucer till you're right up against it, it blends in with the night, and you'd think if they can make this machine, they could get him a better suit. Then he says, "You are safe with me, Edna Bradshaw daughter of Joseph R. Bradshaw and granddaughter of William D. Bradshaw."

It later turns out these family things are important where he's from but I say to him, "William D. is dead, I only have his favorite fountain pen in a drawer somewhere, it's very beautiful, it's gold and it looks like that Chrysler Building in New York, and you should forget about Joseph R. for the

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time being because I'm afraid you and my daddy aren't going to hit it off real well and I just as soon not think about that till I have to."

Then Desi smiles at me and it's because of all those words, and especially me talking so blunt about my daddy, and I guess also about my taking time to tell him about the beautiful fountain pen my granddaddy left for me, but there's reasons I talk like this, I guess, and Desi says he came to like me from hearing me talk.

Listen to me even now. I'm trying to tell this story of Desi and me and I can't help myself going on about every little thing. But the reasons are always the same, and it's true I'm lonely again. And it's true I'm scared again because I've been a fool.

Desi took me off in his spaceship and we went out past the moon and I barely had time to turn around and look back and I wanted to try to figure out where Bovary was but I hadn't even found the USA when everything got blurry and before you know it we were way out in the middle of nowhere, out in space, and I couldn't see the sun or the moon or anything close up, except all the stars were very bright, and I'm not sure whether we were moving or not because there was nothing close enough by to tell, but I think we were parked, like this was the spaceman's version of the dead end road to the rock quarry, where I kissed my first boy. I turned to Desi and he turned to me and I should've been scared but I wasn't. Desi's little suckers were kissing away at my hand and then we were kissing on the lips except he didn't have any but it didn't make any difference because his mouth was soft and warm and smelled sweet, like Binaca breath spray, and I wondered if he got that on earth or if it was something just like Binaca that they have on his planet as well.

Then he took me back to his little room on the spaceship and we sat on things like beanbag chairs and we talked a long time about what life in Bovary is like and what life on his planet is like. Desi is a research scientist, you see. He thinks that the only way for our two peoples to learn about each other is to meet and to talk and so forth. There are others

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where he lives that think it's best just to use their machines to listen in and do their research like that, on the sly. There are even a bunch of guys back there who say forget the whole thing, leave them to hell alone. Let everybody stick to their own place. And I told Desi that my daddy would certainly agree with the leave-them-the-hell-alone guys from his planet, but I agreed with him.

It was all very interesting and very nice, but I was starting to get a little sad. Finally I said to Desi, "So is this thing we're doing here like research? You asked me out as part of a scientific study? I was called by the Gallup Poll people once and I don't remember what it was about but I answered 'none of the above' and 'other' to every question."

For all the honesty Desi said he admired in me, I sure know it wasn't anything to do with my answers to a Gallup Poll that was bothering me, but there I was, bogged down in all of that, and that's a kind of dishonesty, it seems to me now.

But he knew what I was worried about. "No, Edna," he says. "There are many on my planet who would be critical of me. They would say this is why we should have no contact at all with your world. Things like this might happen."

He pauses right there and as far as I know he doesn't have anything to translate and I swallow hard at the knot in my throat and I say, "Things like what?"

Then both his hands take both my hands and when you've got sixteen cute little suckers going at you, it's hard to make any real tough self-denying kind of decisions and that's when I end up with a bona fide spaceman lover. And enough said, as we like to end touchy conversations around the hairdressing parlor, except I will tell you that he was bald all over and it's true what they say about bald men.

Then he takes me to the place where he picked the flower. A moon of some planet or other and there's only these flowers growing as far as the eye can see in all directions and there are clouds in the sky and they are the color of Eddie's turds after a can of Nine Lives Crab and Tuna, which just goes to show that even in some far place in another solar system you can't have everything. But maybe Desi likes those clouds and

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maybe I'd see it that way too sometime, except I may not have that chance now, though I could've, it's my own damn fault, and if I've been sounding a little bit hit and miss and here and there in the way I've been telling all this, it's now you find out why.

Desi and I stand in that field of flowers for a long while, his little suckers going up and down my arm and all over my throat and chest, too, because I can tell you that a spaceman does too appreciate a woman who has some flesh on her, especially in the right places, but he also appreciates a woman who will speak her mind. And I was standing there wondering if I should tell him about those clouds or if I should just keep my eyes on the flowers and my mouth shut. Then he says, "Edna, it is time to go."

So he takes my hand and we go back into his spaceship and he's real quiet all the sudden and so am I because I know the night is coming to an end. Then before you know it, there's the earth right in front of me and it's looking, even out there, pretty good, pretty much like where I should be, like my own flower box and my own propane tank and my own front Dutch door look when I drive home at night from work.

Then we are in the field behind the house and it seems awful early in the evening for as much as we've done, and later on I discover it's like two weeks later and Desi had some other spaceman come and feed Eddie while we were gone, though he should have told me because I might've been in trouble at the hairdressing salon, except they believed me pretty quick when I said a spaceman had taken me off, because that's what they'd sort of come around to thinking themselves after my being gone without a trace for two weeks and they wanted me to tell the newspaper about it because I might get some money for it, though I'm not into anything for the money, though my daddy says it's only American to make money any way you can, but I'm not that American, it seems to me, especially if my daddy is right about what American is, which I suspect he's not.

What I'm trying to say is that Desi stopped in this other field with me, this planet-earth field with plowed up ground

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and witchgrass all around and the smell of early summer in Alabama, which is pretty nice, and the sound of cicadas sawing away in the trees and something like a kind of hum out on the horizon, a nighttime sound I listen to once in a while and it makes me feel like a train whistle in the distance makes me feel, which I also listen for, especially when I'm lying awake with my insomnia and Eddie is sleeping near me, and that hum out there in the distance is all the wide world going about its business and that's good but it makes me glad I'm in my little trailer in Bovary, Alabama, and I know every face I'll see on the street the next morning.

And in the middle of a field full of all that, what was I to say when Desi took my hand and asked me to go away with him? He said, "I have to return to my home planet now and after that go off to other worlds. I am being transferred and I will not be back here. But Edna, we feel love on my planet just like you do here. That is why I know it is right that we learn to speak to each other, your people and mine. And in conclusion, I love you, Edna Bradshaw. I want you to come away with me and be with me forever."

How many chances do you have to be happy? I didn't even want to go to Mobile, though I wasn't asked, that's true enough, and I wouldn't have been happy there anyway. So that doesn't count as a blown chance. But this one was different. How could I love a spaceman? How could I be happy in a distant galaxy? These were questions that I had to answer right away, out in the smell of an Alabama summer with my cat waiting for me, though I'm sure he could've gone with us, that wasn't the issue, and with my daddy living just on the other side of town, though, to tell the truth, I wouldn't miss him much, the good Lord forgive me for that sentiment, and I did love my spaceman, I knew that, and I still do, I love his wiggly hairless shy courteous smart-as-a-whip self. But there's only so many new things a person can take in at once and I'd about reached my limit on that night.

So I heard myself say, "I love you too, Desi. But I can't leave the planet Earth. I can't even leave Bovary."

That's about all I could say. And Desi didn't put up a fuss

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about it, didn't try to talk me out of it, though now I wish to God he'd tried, at least tried, and maybe he could've done it, 'cause I could hear myself saying these words like it wasn't me speaking, like I was standing off a ways just listening in. But my spaceman was shy from the first time I saw him. And I guess he just didn't have it in him to argue with me, once he felt I'd rejected him.

That's the way the girls at the hairdressing salon see it.

I guess they're right. I guess they're right, too, about telling the newspaper my story. Maybe some other spaceman would read it, somebody from Desi's planet, and maybe Desi's been talking about me and maybe he'll hear about how miserable I am now and maybe I can find him or he can find me.

Because I am miserable. I haven't even gone near my daddy for a few months now. I look around at the people in the streets of Bovary and I get real angry at them, for some reason. Still, I stay right where I am. I guess now it's because it's the only place he could ever find me, if he wanted to. I go out into the field back of my trailer at night and I walk all around it, over and over, each night, I walk around and around under the stars because a spaceship only comes in the night and you can't even see it until you get right up next to it.

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Ira Sadoff

Language

It's all talk isn't it, emblem
and suggestion, it's either tremulous stutter
or taunting display: flashy but fleshless, a con man
plotting his way out of a ticket, concocting a story
to conquer and seduce. Once removed,

it's safer to be the figure than the feeling.
On the whale watch I hid in the hold
because I didn't want the awe to wash over me—
so I scribbled *the raven, cormorant and gull,*
archaic signs, obsolete, archaeological fragments,

a cursive you can almost witness, can't you?
A few scrawls of letters among millions. And if
the scatterbrained are speechless, as Mother said,
if their mouths are voiceless, unemployed,
their breath won't spark a mirror. Once removed

I know I'll want to edit, take everything back,
revise, inspect, freeze the event and diminish it
with particulars. Trade the fogbank for a buttress
of seaweed. Struck by the wheeze of the fluke,
I listened to the patter of sailors coasting on breakers,

to how the skittish engine chattered and stalled
and I want to say clamored, for that's how close I was
to the motor humming. Oh I know, talk is cheap. Tawdry,
specious, a source of distance and misunderstanding,
probative and salacious: lustrous too, if I say so.

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Two Poems by John Kinsella

Spring Fever

Sawdust soaked in kerosene,
storm-fallen wood, ash-flurries
over the stoked bed of a dead fire.

Dawn air bites like a solvent
as crazy kids race ring-necked parrots,
whipping motorbikes

into frenzies.
Fog steams over
the house dam

& long-legged waterbirds
preen ahead of the sun's
arrival. The talk

is of rat hunts
in the old sheds
late the night before,

lengths of poly-pipe—
the weapons—
buried guiltily

under sheaves of straw.
Today they will shoot
at their old man's *empties*.

"Hear Jeff hooning in late last night?
Mum says he's got spring fever—
been at the pub every night

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this week." The sun
drags the fog, chips
of sedimentary rock

skip across the water—
the rings of their contact
echoing softly.

Like awkward blue smoke

Like awkward blue smoke
with enveloping wings
the white-faced heron
attempts lift & falters
from the garden dam
near the house
on the back road
where the child stepped out
from the verandah
into the path
of a laden semitrailer
twenty harvests ago,
the salmon gums
running deep pink
in the late
afternoon.

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Sharon Olds

71 B.C.E.

After Marcus Licinius Crassus
defeated the army of Spartacus,
he crucified 6,000 men.
That is what the records say,
as if he drove in the 18,000
nails himself. I wonder how
he felt, that day. I wonder if he went
among them, if he walked that human
woods. I think he stayed inside,
and drank, and maybe copulated,
and heard the singing being done for him,
the woodwind-tuning he was doing at one
remove, to the six-thousandth power.
And maybe he looked out, sometimes,
to see the rows of instruments,
his orchard, the earth bristling with it
as if a patch in his brain had itched
and this was his way of scratching it
directly. I think it gave him pleasure,
and a sense of balance, as if he had suffered
and now had found redress for it,
and voice for it. I speak as a monster,
someone who needs to think, at length,
about Crassus, his ecstasy of feeling
nothing while so much is being
felt, his hot lightness of heart
in being free to walk around
while others are nailed above the earth.
It may have been the happiest day
of his life. If he had suddenly cut
his hand on a wine-glass, I doubt he would

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have woken up to what he was doing.
It is frightening to think of him suddenly
seeing what he was, to think of him running
outside to try to take them down,
one man to save 6,000.
If he could have lowered one,
and seen the eyes when the level of pain
dropped like a sudden soaring into pleasure,
wouldn't that have opened in him
the wild terror of understanding
the other? But then he would have had
5,999
to go. I think it almost never
happens, that a Marcus Crassus
wakes. I think he dozed, and was roused
to his living dream, lifted the flap
and looked outside, at the rustling, creaking
living field—his, like an external
organ, a heart.

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Two Poems by Campbell McGrath

The Prose Poem

On the map it is precise and rectilinear as a chessboard, but driving past you would hardly notice it, a boundary line or ragged margin, a shallow swale that cups a simple trickle of water, less rill than rivulet, more gully than dell, a tangled ditch grown up throughout with a fearsome assortment of wildflowers and bracken. There is no fence, though here and there a weathered post asserts a former claim, strands of fallen wire taken by the dust. To the left a cornfield carries into the distance, dips and rises to the blue sky, a rolling plain of green and healthy plants aligned in close order, row upon row upon row. To the right, a field of wheat, a field of hay, young grasses breaking the soil, filling their allotted land with the rich, slow-waving spectacle of their grain. As to the farmers, they are, for the most part, indistinguishable: here the tractor is red, there yellow; here a pair of dirty hands, there a pair of dirty hands. They are cultivators of the soil. They grow crops by pattern, by acre, by foresight, by habit. What corn is to one, wheat is to the other, and though to some eyes the similarities outweigh the differences it would be as unthinkable for the second to commence planting corn as for the first to switch over to wheat. What happens in the gully between them is no concern of theirs, they say, so long as the plow stays out, the weeds stay in the ditch where they belong, though anyone would notice the wind-sewn cornstalks poking up their shaggy ears like young lovers run off into the bushes, and the kinship of these wild grasses with those the farmer cultivates is too obvious to mention, sage and dun-colored stalks hanging their noble heads, hoarding their exotic burrs and seeds, though it is neither corn nor wheat that truly flourishes there, nor some peculiar hybrid of the two. What grows in that place is

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possessed of an unexpected beauty all its own, even in winter, when the wind hangs icicles from the skeletons of briars and small tracks cross the snow in search of forgotten grain; in the spring the little trickle of water swells to welcome frogs and minnows, a muskrat, a family of turtles, nesting doves in the verdant grass; in summer it is a throughfare for raccoons and opossums, field mice, swallows and blackbirds, migrating egrets, a passing fox; in autumn the geese avoid its ramshackle abundance, seeking out windrows of toppled stalks, fatter grain more quickly discerned, more easily digested. Of those that travel the local road few pay that fertile hollow any mind, even those with an eye for what blossoms, an eye for vetch and timothy, early forsythia, the fatted calf in the fallow field, the rabbit running for cover, the hawk's descent from the lightning-struck tree. You've passed this way yourself, many times, and can tell me, if you would, do the formal fields end where the valley begins, or does everything that surrounds us emerge from its embrace?

Plums

I'm sitting on a hill in Nebraska, in morning sunlight, looking out across the valley of the Platte River. My car is parked far below, in the lot behind the rest stop wigwam, beyond which runs the highway. Beyond the highway: stitch-marks of the railroad; the sandy channels and bars of the Platte, a slow wide bend of cottonwood saplings metallic in the sun; beyond the river a hazy, Cézanne-like geometry of earthy blues, greens and browns fading, at last, into the distance. Barrel music rises up from the traffic on I-80, strings of long-haul truckers rolling west, rolling east, the great age of the automobile burning down before my eyes, a thing of colossal beauty and thoughtlessness. For lunch, in a paper bag: three ripe plums and a cold piece of chicken. It is not yet noon. My senses are

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alive to the warmth of the sun, the smell of the blood of the grass, the euphoria of the journey, the taste of fruit, those plums, succulent and juicy, especially the plums.

So much depends upon the image: chickens; asphodel; a numeral; a seashell;

one white peony flanged with crimson;

a chunk of black ore carried up from the heart of anthracite to be found by a child alongside the tracks like the token vestige of a former life—what is it? *coal*—a touchstone polished by age and handling, so familiar as to be a kind of fetish, a rabbit's foot worn down to bone, a talisman possessed of entirely personal, associative, magical significance.

Why do I still carry it, that moment in Nebraska?

Was it the first time I'd been West, first time driving across the country? Was it the promise of open space, the joy of setting out, the unmistakable goodness of the land and the people, the first hint of connection with the deep wagon-ruts of the dream, the living tissue through which the valley of the Platte has channeled the Mormons and the 49ers, the Pawnee and the Union Pacific, this ribbon of highway beneath a sky alive with the smoke of our transit, the body of the past consumed by the engine of our perpetual restlessness? How am I to choose among these things? Who am I to speak for that younger vision of myself, atop a hill in Nebraska, bathed in morning light? I was there. I bore witness to that moment. I heard it pass, touched it, tasted its mysterious essence. I bear it with me still, an amulet smooth as a fleshless fruit stone.

Plums.

I have stolen your image, William Carlos Williams. Forgive me. They were delicious, so sweet and so cold.

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Robyn Selman

1945–1995

1

Suburbs shrill with Nintendo warriors.
Ten o'clock: a queasy Pax Romana.
The years of our mother's cancer over.
What's left of us retreats to the sofa
to see black & whites found by my brother
in a note-card box with her monogram.
I don't recognize anyone in them.
Degrees of gray gone military green,
white borders turned melancholy ochre.
Whoever knew these people took their names.
Like the pictures I've pawed through at yard sales,
mildewed in milk crates, curled from lack of frames,
tagged five for a dime, three for a nickel—
missing names on tombs of unknown soldiers.

2

Missing names on tombs of unknown soldiers.
I can guess how they got there: tax-driven,
lawyer-run estate sales, diaspora.
I've even been one of the plunderers:
a blue chair, that green and white tea table,
an oak desk I wanted but lost to a
cardiganed scavenger professional,
his eye for profit margin and retail.
But he looked right past the old sepia
tones languishing in hat boxes in Bearsville.
Two glorious 8 × 10s of cross-dressed
women, stamped 1945, Kingston.

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Whadoyouexpect? The men were at war—
from the mouth of one over my shoulder.

3

From the mouth of one over my shoulder:
the prophecy of a male Cassandra.
I gave the pair of pictures that title,
then mounted and hung them on brass anchors
bored into the freckled, pockmarked drywall.
Brown mildew stains melted away by the
framers' visual chemotherapy—
while we were at it we saved another three:
a dark-skinned girl equipped as a sailor,
and a boy, perhaps her younger brother,
in misfit khakis. I bought the British
well-decorated aviatrices
photographed at a troop review in Rome.
The forgotten in plastic bags brought home.

4

The forgotten in plastic bags brought home
to walls that are safe houses for people
we haven't ever met but wished we'd known.
Blameless European girls with model
faces, posing camera right or left.
Too few had as many choices as that.
The upper wall is shelter for girls grown:
the Slavic Jewess, whose good looks made her
dangerous but also kept her lucky,
is safe here besides the cook's apprentice,
and band of southern nannies. Below that,
wide-skirted Union nurses bivouacked.
We keep these unwitting orphans as the
world keeps incomprehensibility.

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5

The world's incomprehensibility:
histories that end up scuttled in a bin
then sold for a little pocket money;
the war that was over over there in
the forties now fought in the nonviolent
breasts and livers of relatives and friends.
Among those, I know a single victor.
At my brother's, the last unseen picture
looks up at me and I'm able to make
out my aunt on a ship, and next to her,
the faded emulsion that forms my mother.
They stand, two in a long line of women,
scarved heads, starched blouses I negotiate
to white flags over a peaceful ocean.

6

White flags surf over a peaceful ocean.
Deep gray the water, shallower gray sky.
Suspended across the wooden deck fly
colored paper triangles that tap danced
when the wind changed direction and shook them.
God, let my parents, my aunt and uncle,
hold one another along those guardrails,
laugh up the gangway, men in fedoras,
women in leather ankle straps and pearls.
No war over. No war begun. No war.
Or so it seemed. What I hadn't noticed
was the placard each woman held before
her—white cardboard signs with large black numbers—
my aunt's 41, mother's 44.

7

Aunt's 41, my mother's 44.
Those are not their ages. My brother wonders

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if this was a shipboard beauty contest,
if it wasn't something innocent? If?
White flags tatter, juxtaposing numbers,
religions, last names, nationalities,
sexes, choice of lovers, to beauty.
And our fathers and uncles, the judges,
reading passports, work papers, visas, birth
certificates, death warrants, these numbers.
The ship moves out of focus but only
until it's retrofitted. I framed the
image but wish I hadn't, in another
suburb shrill with Nintendo warriors.

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J.S. Renau

Night Out

The gargle of water through the pipes,
the rattle of water in the ceramic tub,
and the day is washed off, but what's clean?
One shirt with promise, a sock, off-white—
improvise,
smell right with detergent, with lab-spice.
Keen the streetlights wrap around the block
don't walk don't walk don't walk.

Because the sun hobbled and fell,
because the wind blows fire until now, I will
not sit still tonight, I will not learn to live to strive.
Because the paprika sky turned to pepper,
and I am clean
I have set my affairs on nothing . . .

I have set my affairs on nothing
but dregs. A nylon blouse, broochless, and cat-
tattooed ankle. She is growing pretty
in her booth. Call it happy hour. Call it something
the feline mien
of black hosiery does to me. Because I am early,
her leg is all mine and crossed, bouncing on her knee:
the cat comes alive with pathetic leaps.

Que diras-tu ce soir, mon âme solitaire?
To the cat—perhaps and oh! a stutter and hum.
Perhaps. Her stare turns me to wood. She has my tongue
dumb between her paws—what will you say,
alone and hard,
what will you say tonight, my stomach, my soul?

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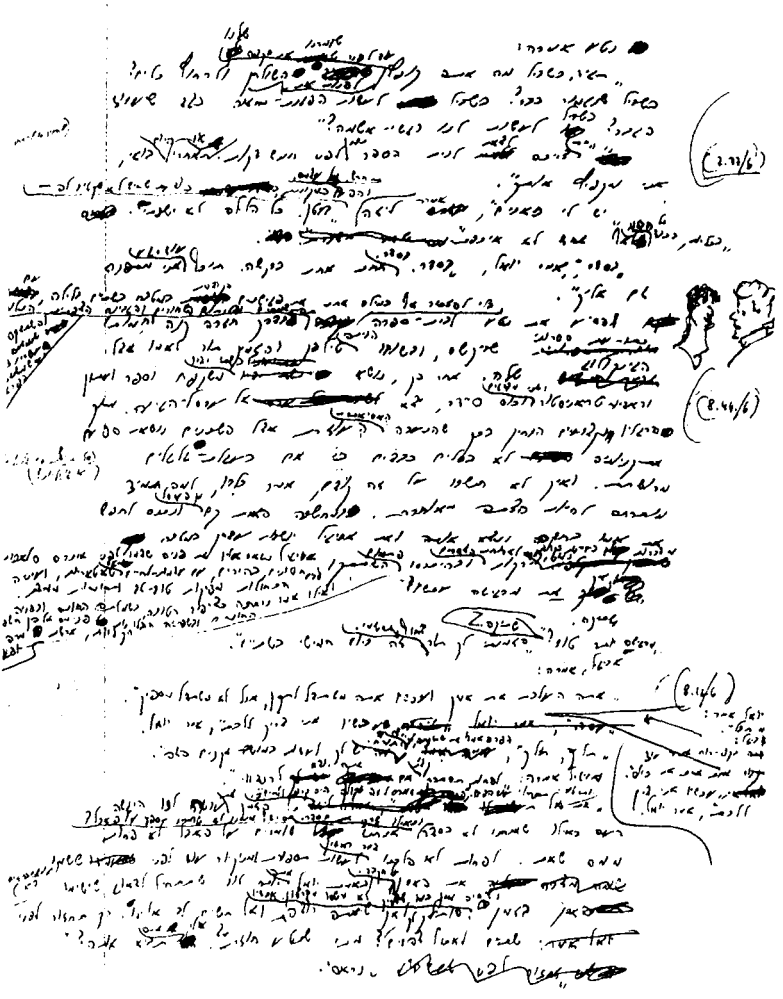

A manuscript page in Hebrew from To Know a Woman.

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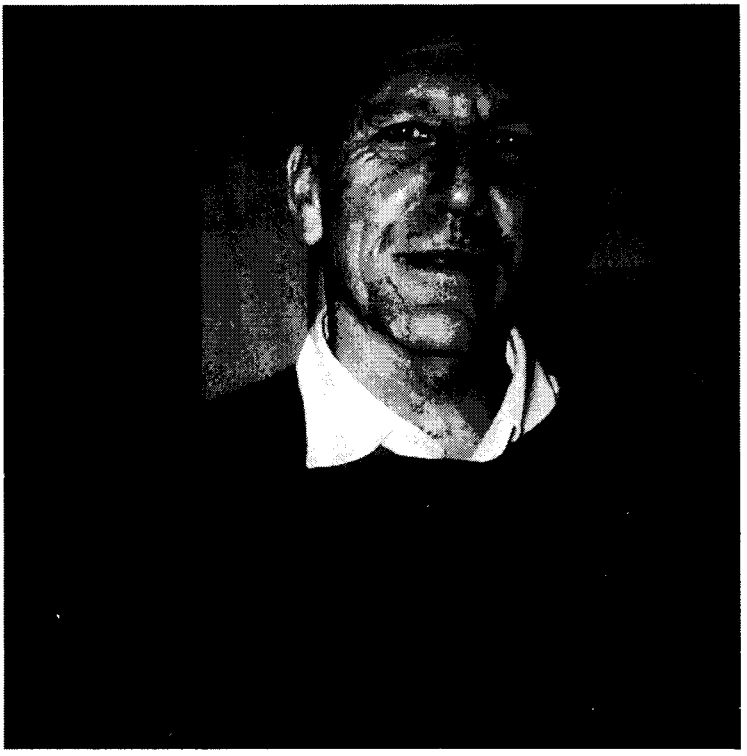

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Amos Oz

The Art of Fiction CXLVIII

Amos Oz lives in Arad, a small new town of twenty-two thousand inhabitants, built in 1961 in the Negev Desert. To reach him I took the bus from Jerusalem to Beersheba, then another to Arad. At the bus station everyone knew his house, and a man directed me to it: uphill along a wide tree-lined road flanked with medium-sized apartment buildings in white sandstone, to the top, where rows of family houses back onto the desert in lateral streets. Roses and huge feathery chrysanthemums grow in his front garden, shaded by a peppertree.

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Inside, the house is simply furnished and welcoming. Stairs lead from the sitting room to Oz's study below: a tidy, womb-like room, entirely lined with books, like wallpaper. One long shelf contains dozens of Oz's own books, in various editions and translations. A comfortable sofa and armchair in gray velveteen, a coffee table, a large desk and a lectern in one corner complete the furniture. Patio windows open onto a small beautiful garden, like a bower, with rosebushes and shrubs, overhung with plumbagos. Beyond is the desert. "I'm proud of my garden," he said. "I created it. There is no topsoil here, so it had to be brought specially."

Amos Oz speaks perfect English, with a slight accent. The clipped, well-rounded sentences, clearly enunciated, indicate the punctuation, as if he were writing. He was born Amos Klausner in 1939 to a family of scholars who had emigrated from Russia in the early 1920s and later settled in Jerusalem. At fifteen he left home for Kibbutz Hulda, where he lived until a few years ago, when his younger son's asthma made the move to Arad necessary—the clean desert air alleviates his condition. He studied philosophy and literature at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and later fought as a reserve soldier in the 1967 Six-Day War in Sinai and on the Golan Heights in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Apart from a dozen novels and some collections of short stories, he has published three books of essays, mostly concerned with the Arab-Israeli conflict. He is one of the earliest activists of the Peace Now movement, advocating a compromise between the two communities based on mutual acceptance and cooperation, and the sharing of land.

When he began to publish his work he took the name Oz, meaning strength. He met his wife Nily at the kibbutz, when they were both fifteen. They have two daughters who have grown up and married, and a teenage son—"the child of our old age"—who lives with them. Nily runs the International Artists' Colony in Arad, where artists from all over the world live and work for a period of eight months.

Amos Oz is a professor of Hebrew literature at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, in Beersheba, and has been vis-

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iting professor at universities in Britain and the U.S. He is much in demand for lectures and conferences, last year traveling to several European countries—France, Poland, Belgium, Germany and Italy, among others.

"He looks like Mel Gibson," his London publisher suggested. Oz has turquoise-blue eyes, short blondish hair and a gentle smile. His courtesy and courtly manners, his acute intelligence and knowledge, made the afternoon I spent with him a delight. It took place in December 1994.

INTERVIEWER

Your traveling schedule is formidable. Yet you produce books at regular intervals. How do you divide your time? First during the year, and then daily?

AMOS OZ

The first rule is never to travel when I'm pregnant with a book. I tend not to travel abroad when I'm writing, and even within this country I limit myself to three or four times a year. It doesn't always work out, but that is my pattern. As for my day, I start at six A.M. with a forty-minute walk in the desert, summer and winter.

INTERVIEWER

Does it ever snow in the desert?

OZ

Oh yes, every two or three years. And then you should see the expression on the faces of the camels crossing the desert! That is when I understand the real meaning of the word *bewilderment!* But even without snow, it is bitterly cold in winter, a savage place at dawn, when stormy winds seem determined to sweep away the whole town into the desert. But walking alone knocks things into proportion. If later on I read in the morning papers that some politician has said this or that will *never* happen, I know that this or that is going to last *forever,* that the stones out there are laughing, that in this desert which

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is unchanged for thousands of years, a politician's *never* is like . . . a month? Six months? Thirty years? Completely insignificant.

I then have my coffee and come down to this room, sit at my desk and wait. Without reading, listening to music or answering the phone. Then I write, sometimes a sentence, sometimes a paragraph, in a good day half a page. But I am here at least seven or eight hours every day. I used to feel guilty about an unproductive morning, especially when I lived on the kibbutz, and everyone else was working—ploughing fields, milking cows, planting trees. Now I think of my work as that of a shopkeeper: it is my job to open up in the morning, sit and wait for customers. If I get some, it is a blessed morning, if not, well, I'm still doing my job. So the guilt has gone, and I try to stick to my shopkeeper's routine. Chores like answering letters, faxes and telephone calls are squeezed in an hour before lunch or dinner.

Perhaps poets and short-story writers can work with a different pattern. But writing novels is a very disciplined business. Writing a poem is like having an affair, a one-night stand; a short story is a romance, a relationship; a novel is a marriage: one has to be cunning, devise compromises and make sacrifices.

INTERVIEWER

What about the evenings? Arad doesn't seem crackling with exciting nightlife. It seems fast asleep even on this sunny afternoon.

OZ

Don't you believe it! It is an exciting little place: three restaurants and three banks, a brand-new shopping mall, a barbershop and a bookstore. We have had an influx of overqualified Russian Jews in recent years. We say that if a Russian arrives who is not carrying a violin, it's only because he or she is a pianist. So we have good concerts.

Sometimes I come down here after dinner and read what

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I have written during the day. I demolish mercilessly, to start again the next morning. Sometimes I go out and sit myself at the local parliament: a couple of benches at the café where people argue about the meaning of life, the significance of history or the *real* intention of God, and that's my favorite pastime.

INTERVIEWER

When do you fit in your journalism?

OZ

I write articles not because I'm asked to, but because I'm filled with *rage*. I feel I have to tell my government what to do and, sometimes, where to go. Not that they listen. Then I drop everything and write an essay, which is always published here first, then picked up by *The New York Times*, or England's *Guardian* or another publication. You see, I'm not a political analyst or commentator. I write from a sense of injustice and my revolt against it. But I can write an article only when I agree with myself 100 percent, which is not my normal condition—normally I'm in partial disagreement with myself and can identify with three or five different views and different feelings about the same issue. That is when I write a story, where different characters can express different views on the same subject. I have never written a story or a novel to make people change their minds about anything—not once. When I need to do this, I write an essay, or an article. I even use two different pens, as a symbolic gesture: one to tell stories, the other to tell the government what to do with itself. Both, by the way, are very ordinary ballpoint pens, which I change every three weeks or so.

Unlike stories, articles are written in one burst, over six or seven hours. It is like having a quarrel with my wife—we scream and shout and later make up. We live in a Fellini movie, not an Ingmar Bergman one: anything is better than silence and sulking and making each other feel guilty. I act upon the same principle in politics.

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INTERVIEWER

How do you write? Standing at that lectern, like Hemingway, or sitting down? Do you write in longhand or with a word processor?

OZ

I write in longhand. That machine on my desk [*a word processor*] is for typing out, not composing. For years I had my portable typewriter on which I typed the final draft, so that others could read it. Now I do the same on the word processor. I don't even edit on it, but rewrite and rewrite in longhand. After many drafts I finally type it out. The word processor is, for me, nothing but a typewriter, only you don't have to use Typex to erase or correct a mistake.

I walk round the room, then stand by the lectern and put down a sentence, and walk round again. I sway between the desk and the lectern.

INTERVIEWER

You have chosen to write in Hebrew, which is important for two reasons. The first is that it is the official language and therefore bound with the national identity . . .

OZ

Oh no, I have never chosen Hebrew. I was born into it. It is my native tongue. I dream and laugh and curse in Hebrew. And I have said many times that I'm a chauvinist only in respect of the language, and that even if I had to part with this country, I would never part with the language. I feel for the language everything that perhaps I don't always feel for the country.

INTERVIEWER

The second reason is that Hebrew is a sacred language, a language of revelation, a language in which God has spoken, like Arabic and Sanskrit. It is both a challenge and a responsibility to use it. Yet modern Hebrew is said to be only a hundred

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years old, and has been invented by poets like Bialik and other early writers. Could you not have written in English?

OZ

No, I could not. Hebrew is the language in which I think, count, laugh and make love. It is part of my being. But you are right, as a spoken language it was as dead as ancient Greek or Latin. It had an old literature, and a medieval literature, but no everyday currency. It was used for religious rituals and scholarly exchanges among Jews of various countries. It also had some high-flown poetry written in the Middle Ages by Jews in Muslim Spain, who loved Hebrew but didn't speak it in everyday life.

So Hebrew was revived here a hundred years ago, but not as a result of an ideological decision, which cannot be done—no argument or decision could make the Canadians suddenly start speaking Korean or Japanese. The reason why Hebrew was revived here is because it was the only language the Jews coming from all over the world had in common. The Oriental Jews spoke Arabic, Persian, Turkish or Ladino (a Spanish dialect), while the European Jews spoke Yiddish, Russian, Polish. The only language in which they could communicate—to ask directions in the street, to rent a flat or a shop—was the prayer book Hebrew.

But for me the revival of Hebrew occurred when the first boy said to the first girl, "I love you" in Hebrew. Or was it the girl who said it to the boy? This had not happened for seventeen centuries. I hope that boy and girl had their way with each other and lived happily ever after—they deserved to, for having revived the language. Yet it couldn't have happened if there had not already existed a significant body of literature in Hebrew, a literature that contained, surprisingly, several modern sensibilities. People like Bialik, Brenner, Berdichevsky, Mendele—names that mean nothing to you or your readers—but I'm standing on their shoulders.

On the other hand, Hebrew is like a volcano, like Elizabethan English. I'm not implying that our poets are all Shakespeare, rather that the language is erupting like a volcano; it

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is happening all the time. So writing in Hebrew is a wonderful challenge.

You said it is the language of revelation. You are right. Think of playing a piece of chamber music inside a cathedral—you have to be very careful with the acoustics, otherwise you may produce a lot of echoes you don't want. You have to use words that have prophetic and mystical connotations to describe a little pocket-money disagreement between parents and children. You don't want to bring in Isaiah and Psalms and Mount Sinai. So you are always tiptoeing on a minefield. If sometimes you want to produce an explosion, then it is easily done—by introducing a weighty word in the middle of a prosaic sentence. I have a feeling that I work with a wonderful musical instrument.

INTERVIEWER

The creation of an academy at the inception of the State of Israel must have helped bring the language up to date, making it adequate for expressing what you call "modern sensibilities." Do you think it was important? Or would the language have evolved anyway?

OZ

It was important to establish Hebrew. There was first a committee, which later became the Academy of Hebrew Language, of which I'm a proud member. It deals with the need to create modern terminology, but cannot, of course, control the language, which as I said is like a gushing crater, with an organic life of its own.

INTERVIEWER

There are other famous modern Hebrew writers: the Nobel Prize winner S.Y. Agnon, A.B. Yehoshua, David Grossman, among others. It seems that writers are taken very seriously in this country. In the West commercial considerations play an important role. As a result, Shelley's claim that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" seems to apply here more than with us. Is that the case?

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OZ

We have a somewhat different tradition. In the West, at least in English-speaking countries, writers, even great writers and poets, are usually regarded primarily as entertainers. They can be fine, subtle, deep, but still they are entertainers. Even Shakespeare is regarded as a magnificent, perhaps the greatest, entertainer. By contrast, in the Judeo-Slavic tradition, writers are regarded as prophets. This can be a terrible burden, for unlike the prophets I don't hear voices from above, and I don't think I'm any more equipped to be a prophet—to foresee the future or serve as the people's conscience—than an American or a British writer. Yet there is a huge expectation here, and so it is also in Russia or Poland.

Perhaps we can start to examine the word *fiction*, which does not exist in Hebrew. The academy has invented *bidayon* to translate the English word, but in bookstores you won't find my works or any other novelist's under that title. You will find them under the title *siporet*, which means narrative prose. That is a bit more decent, because fiction has a ring of lying about it, the opposite of truth. In my view this is nonsense: why should James Joyce, who took the trouble of literally measuring how many steps there were between the bar and the letter-box on the street corner, or Tolstoy, who studied the minutest details of the Battle of Borodino, be regarded as fiction writers, while the most banal journalist using such clichés as "the boiling cauldron of the Middle East" be regarded as a nonfiction writer? The novelist has no political aim but is concerned with truth, not facts. As I say in one of my essays, sometimes the worst enemy of truth is fact. I'm a writer of narrative prose, *siporet*, but I'm not a prophet or a guide, nor am I an inventor of "fiction."

INTERVIEWER

Yet your work is very much rooted in the realities of Israel today, and you do tell the people and the government what is right and what is wrong . . .

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OZ

Because our lives are soaked with history. History is not something on the TV screens, or overseas, or in the Congress or the House of Commons, it is everywhere, and it penetrates the most intimate tissues of life. To give an example: during the recent Gulf War, we were issued gas masks against chemical bombs. My son who is asthmatic and can hardly breathe had to wear it. We were sitting, shut tight in a sealed bedroom, wearing these ghastly masks, looking like monsters, our most private intimacy invaded by a threat from two thousand miles away. So you see, we can't get away from the realities. People use moments in the country's history to measure time: "I got married just before the Six Day War," they say, or "My daughter was born the day Sadat came to Israel."

INTERVIEWER

What language did you speak at home? Did your parents speak Russian or just Hebrew?

OZ

My father was from Odessa originally and had emigrated to Vilnius, Lithuania, which at that time was part of Poland; my mother was from Ukraine. Their languages were Russian or Polish. They met in Jerusalem, as students at the Hebrew University. My father knew sixteen languages and spoke ten of them, and my mother knew seven or eight languages too. They spoke Russian when they didn't want me to understand, otherwise they insisted on using only Hebrew. They feared that if I learned any European language I might be tempted to go back to Europe, which they regarded as deadly for Jews. They themselves had a love-hate relationship with it, as after an unrequited love: they loved Europe, but Europe kicked them out. They left in the nick of time, otherwise I would not be sitting here talking to you.

INTERVIEWER

Your parents came from that area which used to change hands between Poland and Russia, and where anti-Semitism

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was more virulent than perhaps elsewhere in Europe. But isn't anti-Semitism part of the fabric of European civilization?

OZ

I have said that the image of the Jew is a segment of the European-Christian imagination, in every sense. There is the wonderful, adorable Jew who is almost superhuman, who suffers so much and excels. Then there is the terrible diabolical Jew who destroys everything in devious ways. The common denominator between these two types of Jew—the good and the bad—is that neither is regarded as individual, both are forever representatives of their race.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that the creation of Israel has got rid of that image? I notice here that people, especially young Israelis, are not at all like European Jews, self-conscious about being apart, but just people, like anyone else in the world.

OZ

I don't know. It was certainly one of its purposes. It is time to dissociate the relationship between the Jews and the Christian Europe and create a different, more balanced relationship. A neighborly relationship, a come-and-have-a-cup-of-coffee relationship, not an everlasting host-guest relationship, which is bad for both the guest and the host. Even when the guest has become a prominent member of the family, marrying the son or the daughter of the host. Even when the Jew has become more fluent in the language, traditions and culture of the country than the "natives."

INTERVIEWER

Your work is very much rooted in Israel, from the first stories and novel, *Elsewhere, Perhaps*, which depicted the life of the kibbutz, to *Fima*, the latest to appear in English. They arouse controversy for that reason. In a sense the chief protagonist in your books is the land of Israel. Your position is that a

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homeland cannot be denied to the Palestinians any more than it could be denied to Jews. So what is the solution?

OZ

The Arab world still spends twenty to twenty-five billion dollars on armaments per year. Why? The point is that the Palestinians are here, and that they won't go away. And the Israelis are here, and they won't go away either. So they are two peoples claiming the same piece of land, the same house. They cannot share it, so they have to divide it. I think it is urgent for the Palestinians in the occupied territories to conduct free, internationally supervised elections, and whoever is elected should represent them and run their government. It will be the first time they will have a legitimate representative government.

INTERVIEWER

What if the free elections bring in the extremists?

OZ

Even Hamas might become part of the democratic political machinery and behave responsibly, or we might be back to square one, and have a clear knowledge that there is no chance of conducting business with them. If that should happen, we will have to proceed with a unilateral partition, saying, "You don't want to negotiate with us? Very well, we divide: you take this bedroom, we take the other, you take this bathroom and we take the other." It is like dividing a flat, turning it into a semi-detached house.

INTERVIEWER

In the meantime, there is the question of human rights: the Left accuses you of not taking a strong stand on this and condemn the treatment of Palestinians by the Israeli occupied forces.

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OZ

It is a question of diagnosis. The conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis is not a civil rights issue, but an international dispute. We have not conquered the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in order to deprive the Palestinians of their human rights (they never had many of those), nor in order to give them their human rights. We conquered the West Bank and the Gaza Strip because Israel was attacked in 1967, and threatened with extinction. Once our security is safeguarded, we ought to go away from the Palestinian areas and let them be. Palestinian human rights is a Palestinian problem.

INTERVIEWER

But the treatment of Palestinians during the Intifada by the Israelis is what Israel's human rights people have in mind.

OZ

It is an illusion to think that there can be a rosy military occupation. It is like a friendly rape—a contradiction in terms. I have invested every ounce of my energy in finding ways to *terminate* the occupation, not to *improve* it, because I don't think that if only the occupation were nicer it would resolve anything. We don't need to improve the way we rule over them, we need to *stop* ruling over them. So in some ways my attitude has been more radical than that of the human rights people. They have regarded the issue as a clash between two communities, or two social classes, while I have always considered it an international dispute between two different nations. Therefore I have not wasted any time trying to introduce certain American left-wing concepts such as regarding the Palestinians as our Black Americans, or proposing that all we need is a system of yellow buses and integration. I don't waste time on these irrelevancies.

INTERVIEWER

You mean people like Chomsky and other left-wing campus intellectuals?

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OZ

Chomsky has always been dogmatic on the Middle East conflict. A few years ago in Germany I met some left-wing intellectuals who were enthusiastically pro-Saddam Hussein. I wondered why? They said because he represented a poor third world nation standing up to American domination. I explained to them that Saddam represented a country far richer than Sweden. "How come?" they asked. I said that in terms of income-per-capita, Iraq is richer than Sweden. They said: "But we see Iraqis living in hovels, in abject poverty." I said that if Sweden decided to have the third biggest army in the world, the Swedes too would be living in hovels. I told them that in truth they loved Saddam because he is a friend of Gadhafi, who is a friend of Fidel Castro, who was once married to Che Guevara and Che was Jesus Christ, and Jesus is love, therefore we have to love Saddam.

INTERVIEWER

Nevertheless, the idea is that if reasonable people of both sides sat together, they could find a solution. Have you met Hanane Achraoui, for example? She seems a very intelligent and reasonable person.

OZ

I have met hundreds of Palestinians, not necessarily in the happy sense of unison of hearts, but on a pragmatic basis. It is another misconception of the West: they assume that the Israelis and the Palestinians need to get to know each other better. I get invitations from well-meaning institutions in America to go and spend a wonderful weekend with a number of Palestinians in order that we may get to know and like each other, and *whissht*, the conflict will go away! Like group therapy or marriage counseling. As if the Arab-Israeli conflict were just a misunderstanding. I have news for them: there is no misunderstanding between the Israelis and the Palestinians. We both want the same piece of land because we both regard it as ours. This provides for a perfect understanding,

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and for a bitter conflict. As I said, it is justice against justice—a perfect tragedy.

It must be resolved through a painful compromise, and not through having coffee together. Rivers of coffee drunk together cannot extinguish the tragedy of two peoples regarding the same little country as their own and only homeland. We need to divide it. We need to work out a mutually acceptable compromise.

INTERVIEWER

What did you read as a child and as an adolescent?

OZ

Some of those Hebrew writers of a hundred years ago I mentioned earlier were also compulsive translators, and had translated the great nineteenth-century Russians, who were a source of inspiration to many of them, and also German, French, English and Scandinavian authors. I read like a maniac all of them—there was nothing else to do.

INTERVIEWER

Who were the authors that left a lasting impression, or triggered off your own vocation?

OZ

When I was nine or ten I read Zionist books about the glories of the ancient kingdoms of Israel. I decided to become a terrorist against the British Mandate, I built an intercontinental rocket with the wreck of a refrigerator and the relic of a motorcycle. My plan was to aim this rocket at Buckingham Palace, then send a letter to the King of England saying, "Either you get out of my country or off you go!" I was an Intifada child against the British—I threw stones at British soldiers and shouted "go home." So my early reading was nationalistic, in the spirit of third world freedom-fighting: books about the Italian risorgimento, like De Amicis's *Heart*, about little children who save their country by some heroic

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deed or self-sacrifice. Later I discovered the Russians, in particular Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and above all Chekhov. I felt Chekhov must have come from our neighborhood in Jerusalem, no one had ever captured those little paralyzed work reformers who use big words as he did.

INTERVIEWER

What about the American writers? Your work has often been likened to Faulkner's, in that he was rooted in the American South, in his own area, Yoknapatawpha County, yet has a universal appeal.

OZ

There are three American writers who have become very important to me: Melville, Sherwood Anderson and Faulkner, in that order. I admire other American writers, but those three are the ones I would single out in American literature.

INTERVIEWER

When did you decide to become a writer? After you had bombed Buckingham Palace?

OZ

There was no contradiction between the two activities: I could be a terrorist *and* write. My father was writing fiery illicit pamphlets against the perfidious Albion, calling the British every name in the book, quoting Shelley and Keats and Byron to prove how hypocritical and unjust they were. At the same time he was a great Anglophile, as the following anecdote illustrates. In 1947 there was a curfew and a house-to-house search. My father was asked by the Jewish underground to hide a couple of Molotov cocktails in our home; it was risky, as there was a death penalty for terrorist activities. Our apartment was tiny and choking with thousands of books, and my father hid the explosives behind some books on a shelf, and told us about it so that we didn't set them off by mistake. The British arrived—I still have a vivid memory of the inci-

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dent—they wore khaki shorts down to their knees and khaki socks up to their knees and in between their knees were exposed, white as snow on the Alps. The officer was extremely polite and, apologizing profusely for the inconvenience, began the search with a couple of soldiers. We were terrified. They evidently thought my father was too bookish to be a terrorist and searched perfunctorily. As they turned to go, the officer made some polite remark about the books and asked if there were any interesting English ones. That set my father off: "How do you mean, Sir? Of course we have English books!" he said, and began to pull out one English classic after another. My mother and I were petrified, lest having forgotten about the explosives, he might suddenly expose them or cause an explosion, while he was showing off. The reason we survived was that he had hidden the explosives behind Russian books—with the anarchists and terrorists of nineteenth-century Russia—Bakunin, Nechaev, Kropotkin, Dostoyevsky.

INTERVIEWER

Your mother died when you were thirteen and you left home for the kibbutz at fifteen. Why?

OZ

I rebelled against my father and the bookish atmosphere of the house. I wanted a different life. I thought I would carry out the revolution my father talked about but didn't *do* anything to create. I didn't give a fig about school or university—I wanted to be a tractor driver, like the ones in Soviet movies, working all day and drinking and making wild love to kibbutz girls all night. It happened, to some extent, but what did not happen was getting away from books.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start writing?

OZ

I had always written, ever since I had learned the alphabet at the age of five. I invented little stories. I wrote at school,

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and when I was a tractor driver in the kibbutz and when I was in the army. The turning point came when I became conscious that I was born to write, and *decided* to be a writer. A couple of poems and short stories I had written while working in cotton fields were published and well received. So I applied for a one-day-per-week dispensation from farmwork to write. Now everyone could have claimed he or she was an artist and asked for release from manual work. A committee had to decide who was a genuine artist and who was not. They said if we grant a day off to Oz, how can we refuse it to the next applicant? There was an old man—the age I'm now—who said, "Maybe this young man has talent, maybe he is a future Tolstoy, but he is much too young. Let him work in the fields until he is forty, then he'll have something to write about." Luckily he was overruled, and I was told that I could have one day a week, provided I worked doubly hard on other days, which I did. But I was focused—I thought about what I was writing all the while I was working in the fields. On writing days I wrote twelve, even fifteen hours a day.

INTERVIEWER

The result was your first collection of short stories, *Where the Jackals Howl*. Did you decide to write short stories, before tackling a novel, as a kind of training, the way an athlete does?

OZ

I needed quick satisfaction. I was very young and didn't have the patience and wisdom to play long games. I decided to write short stories because it is a craft which gets you there in a short time. I could work on a story in my head, then sit down and write it in one day. Incidentally, I can no longer do this. I have a different pace.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you will go back to the genre?

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OZ

I might. I do from time to time even now, but not in the same way—under the rhythm of teenage sexuality, with a tremendous drive and an unquenchable thirst for immediate satisfaction. Now I write a first draft, rewrite it, come back to it and work on a particular point, change this or that section and chisel away all the superfluous stuff.

INTERVIEWER

After that first book you went to university. Why? And why did you choose philosophy?

OZ

The kibbutz sent me to university because they needed teachers. My father said you never see an advertisement in a newspaper saying, "Wanted: a philosopher!" So I thought I might as well study something which nobody wanted. But I was lucky: I caught the tail end of the generation of great philosophers teaching at Jerusalem University. The spirit of Martin Buber was still there, as were Gershom Scholem and Bergman and others. Jerusalem was then a bastion of central European thought, from Germany and Prague. But I was reading philosophy while coping with generalizations, because I was a storyteller. When in a discussion about ethics the professor said, by way of illustration, "The first time Ruth met David," my mind wandered off, and I began to imagine a story around their meeting. But I managed to get fair grades and finish my degree.

INTERVIEWER

What was the curriculum? What did you read?

OZ

Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas . . . but I specialized in Spinoza.

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INTERVIEWER

Spinoza is perhaps the greatest political thinker. Was it politics that attracted you to him?

OZ

Not especially. He created these ice palaces of pure logic, which were the crystallization of emotions which at that time fascinated me. It was like music; he was closer to classical music than any other philosopher. He turned me on, like Bach.

INTERVIEWER

In *A Perfect Peace*, you say that Spinoza is not against hope, that on the contrary he "specifically stresses the idea of human freedom." That we are free to accept the "laws underlying the inevitable." This is an interesting existential position, and you once had a long conversation with Ben-Gurion, who also was inspired by Spinoza. Can you elaborate on that?

OZ

What I meant was that there is a perfect balance in Spinoza between observation and action, in that observation does not lead to passivity and fatalism: you don't have to discard your intellect in order to take action. Most philosophers believe that you have to give up something for the sake of something else: either reason or emotion, either this or that . . .

I was a young soldier and read something Ben-Gurion had written about Spinoza, and I wrote him a letter in which I strongly objected to his interpretation of the philosopher. To my surprise his secretary rang and summoned me to his office the next day at dawn. Imagine being summoned by the queen, or the president of the United States. Ben-Gurion had tremendous prestige and charisma, though a tiny man, with a huge head. He paced up and down and tore my arguments to pieces, sharp as a razor.

INTERVIEWER

Spinoza acknowledged the divinity of Christ, and was excommunicated by the Jewish religious establishment, the sin

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of apostasy being one of the most heinous in Judaism. I don't think that his conversion to Christianity was tactical—he really believed in it. What do you think of that? Have you been tempted by Christianity?

OZ

Spinoza never converted to Christianity. He was excommunicated by the Jewish religious leaders of Amsterdam, but never became a Christian. As for me, I am fascinated by Jesus, one of the greatest Jews of all times, but I have never been tempted by Christianity. Jesus himself, who had never crossed himself, never in his life seen nor could see the inside of a church, might or might not, if he lived longer, have had a taste for this or that Christian church. Or he might have kept his distance.

INTERVIEWER

Going back to your own writing. Often the most solidly rooted works of art are the most universal. The great Russians are an example: Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Chekhov, couldn't be anything but Russian, yet we all recognize ourselves in their characters and predicaments. But in your novels, one gets the impression that the real protagonist is Israel—the land, the people, the history. One favorite in the West is *My Michael*, which is the story of the relationship between Hannah, an Israeli woman, and two Arab men in the aftermath of the Suez crisis. It is read as an expression of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Do you consciously set out to incarnate an idea?

OZ

You know, if you write in a troubled part of the world, everything is interpreted allegorically. If I wrote a story about a mother, a father and their daughter, a critic would say that the father represents the government, the mother, the old values, and the daughter the shattered economy! If *Moby-Dick* was written in South America today under the name of Vargas Llosa, people would say it is about dictatorship. If it were

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written in South Africa by Nadine Gordimer, it would be interpreted as the conflict between the blacks and the whites. In Russia the whale would be Stalin, in the Middle East the novel would be about Israelis chasing Palestinians or vice versa. So that is the price you pay for writing in a trouble spot. But I always start with a group of characters. Then they tell their story. I never wrote a political allegory, or a novel of ideas.

INTERVIEWER

Nonetheless you have said that the Arab-Israeli conflict is a tragedy because both are right in their claims to the land—"it is justice against justice."

OZ

Oh, yes, in an essay. But my novels are not about justice. I'll tell you a Hasidic story from the Middle Ages, about a rabbi who in his capacity as a judge has to pass a verdict between two claims for the same goat. He listens carefully to both claimants, then he decrees that they are both right. His wife says, "Dear Husband, it is impossible, you can't divide a goat; either it belongs to X or to Y, they can't both be right." The rabbi scratches his head and says, "You know, dear Wife, you too are right!"

I am that rabbi. If I had to tell you in one word what my work is about, I would say *family*. I find the family the most mysterious institution, and the most unlikely, paradoxical, contradictory. We have been hearing prophesies about the death of the family for centuries. And look how it has survived religions and ideologies and regimes and historical changes. Father, mother, brothers and sisters, and what goes on among them. This idea makes me realize that many conflicts in the world can be conceived in family terms: a perpetual rotation of love and hatred, jealousy and solidarity, happiness and misery. This rotation is in almost every one of my novels. It is a family in which everybody is in conflict with everybody else and everybody is right, just as in the story of the rabbi

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and the goat. The son is right because the father is tyrannical, the father is right because the son is lazy and disrespectful, the mother is right because son and father are exactly alike and deserve each other, and the daughter is right who can't stand the atmosphere and has left the house. Yet they all love each other. So I sometimes see the international conflicts through the perspective of the family.

INTERVIEWER

Tolstoy says all happy families are alike, the unhappy ones are unhappy in different ways . . .

OZ

With due respect to Tolstoy, I think it is the opposite. There are half a dozen clichés of unhappy families, but each happy family—and these are really rare—is unique. I'm fascinated by happy families.

INTERVIEWER

There is a noticeable change in your last few novels, both in form and content. For example the penultimate one to appear in England, *Black Box*, is epistolary. Why did you suddenly decide on this form?

OZ

By accident. I meant to begin the novel with a letter from a woman to her ex-husband, whom she had divorced seven years previously. They have a son whom the husband has renounced completely, and the ex-wife wants to arrange a meeting between them. So I thought I would start with her letter. But then the husband answered back, a correspondence started between them, and gradually other characters wrote letters, and it went on, beyond my control, until the end. It is a mistake to think that the novelist is God Almighty and can do anything he wants. At some point the characters take over. The novelist can put his foot down and say, "I refuse to take

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that direction," but he cannot tell his characters who to be and how to unravel their stories. *Black Box* evolved into an epistolary novel because the characters wanted it that way. I have to add that it is a dreadfully difficult form, especially now that people just pick up the phone and never bother to write, so that the form has little credibility. In this case as the characters didn't talk to each other, writing letters was the answer. I mean who writes letters now? A husband and wife who have had a row, and don't speak, they leave little notes on the refrigerator or the sideboard; children who have gone away but write to their parents, whom they can't stand, to ask for money. So letters become a medium of intimacy and detachment at the same time. It is also a good way of putting thoughts across without being interrupted in mid-sentence, which is what happens in family arguments. As I said I always start with a bunch of characters.

INTERVIEWER

Another new aspect of your latest novels is the erotic element. Is it because you yourself have reached the midlife point, when one begins to ask questions about basic aspects of life?

OZ

The erotic has always been present in my work. There are not many explicitly sexual scenes, but there is an erotic electricity. I don't think it is something that suddenly surfaces in my recent books.

INTERVIEWER

How long does it take for your novels to appear in the West after publication in Israel?

OZ

Usually it takes two years for a book to be translated, depending on how quickly Nicholas de Lange, my translator, works, and on how long the production takes. The new one

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will be called *Don't Call it Night*. It is about middle-age love, and about childlessness. It takes place in a small desert town not unlike Arad. Two middle-age people have been living together for many years but have no children . . . But I'm not giving you the whole plot!

INTERVIEWER

What about the novel you are writing now?

OZ

I never talk about it—one mustn't expose pregnancy to X rays, it can damage the baby.

INTERVIEWER

You are still young and have a substantial body of work behind you. Do you ever think about death?

OZ

I'm fifty-seven, and in Israel that is no longer young. It means I'm older than my country. Of course I think of death. I wouldn't have an intoxicated enjoyment of life if I didn't think of death every day. I think of death, but even more I think of the dead. Thinking of the dead is preparing for one's own death. Because those dead people exist only in my memory, my longing, my ability to reconstruct a bygone moment, almost a Proustian recapturing of precise gestures, which might have occurred fifty years ago. One day I spent hours quietly reconstructing a ten-minute episode of my childhood: a room with six people in it, and I am the only one still alive. Who was sitting where? Who was saying what? Then I thought: "I'm keeping those people alive for as long as I can, in my heart, my head or my writing. If when I die someone will keep me alive in the same way, it will be a fair deal."

INTERVIEWER

After fifty, death can come any time . . . "Readiness is all," as Hamlet said.

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INTERVIEWER

I'd rather it came fifty years from now. I love life and enjoy it tremendously, but part of that enjoyment is that my life is populated with the dead as well as the living. If death arrived tonight, it would find me angry and unwilling, but not unprepared.

—Shusha Guppy

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Irving Feldman

Lives of the Poets

Good old Paul—when he might have been kind
to a kid, he made a pass instead.

Well, literally zillions of passes
are launched all the time: by day and by night
hot dragon pantings, pawings, pinches, winks,
insinuating, sucking smooches like silks
ripping deliciously from throat to crotch,
lewd, obvious leers and gross eyeballings,
and quiet invitations to dinner, drinks
—all throng the atmosphere around the planet
till Eros gasps for air, blanches, blushes.
This very second dozens hundreds thousands
of passes are dying to get themselves laid
to rest in the worst ways imaginable.
And while most fall flat and pass away,
some, believe it or not, make out, connect.
And who's to say the world should be different?
Then was Paul's especially brutal? Hardly.
Undeniably importunate? Puh-lease!
Or something like a minor herbivore
trespassing on its munching way? Perhaps,
perhaps—if one could ask the grasses.
Really, as passes go, it was prosaic
—a small *éclat* of soul's wind, like the ghost
of affection absent, chill, and odorless
but for its fetor of self-absorption.
(If Eros heard it, did he hold his nose
and utter some rudeness in return?
Or let it pass, as manners ask one to?)
Puff, it was present; *piff*, it was past.

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But piffling though it was, and pitiful
—imagine, if you will, a pass on day-leave
from an orphanage or hospital—and brief
and too impeccably impersonal
to be malicious, still it wasn't kind.

•

Sunny afternoon (May? June?) in 'forty-six.
Fifth floor cold water walk up on Orchard Street.
I'm a student slash poet slash bohemian.
The world is all before me. I laugh a lot.
My spirits too high for whatever turns up,
and "greatness" the afflatus fluttering my tongue,
I'm at that age: unable to distinguish
ardent idealism from ambition
from rebelliousness from my sense of fun.
I add my dash of satiric slash fervid fizz
to the Lower East Side's postwar bubbling scene
—where my signature is swirled off into
the *Zeitspritz* of the many-minded foam.

Paul, at twice my seventeen, is slash nothing.
He's fully hyphenated, poet-novelist-
playwright-critic-teacher, but unstuffy, boyish,
and like a boy responsible to truth only
and to his pleasure. He's one of us, our best:
self-styled Socrates and wonderful *Überkind*
(whom success alone will save from ending as
resentful *Untermensch*): our David, our champion,
doing in the dinosaurs of Authority
—with uncredentialed, free-lance brainpower,
the look-ma-no-hands of the genial amateur.
His surefire dialectical judo pretzels
the bully in bully's own dumbbell stranglehold.
Once he shows those dads they're extinct, they'll just *go*.
He's got the word on everything—including,
quite possibly, me? I admire so much

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I copycat this man I scarcely know.
And now he's dropped by, dying, as he says,
to hear me read aloud from my *oeuvre*.
Will I do that for him?
Why, certainly, sir.
Pages gripped in one hand, about to begin
—when suddenly he lunges for the other
like someone really dying, clawing for help,
drowning, going under, heart infarcted,
hand hemmorhaging mortality at every pore.
And I'm to lift him out? To stanch the bleeding?
But *no*, my hand's apparently a telephone
connecting heart to heart, and he's calling up.
Look! as if to filter visual static
from aural ecstasies to come, his lids have shut.
Charade of a soul in transport, wholly tuned in
—to whom I sit reciting every blessèd one
of my twenty, precious, tender, teeny poems.
And all the while something odd is going on.
What he appropriates, promptly I disown.
My person redefines itself at the wrist.
If he wants whatever it is, here, take it!
My arm's offended by this stupid mitt.
Pluck it off! Anyway, I could care less
—I'll grow another, new, strong, articulate.
And the rest of me will get away clean!
(But if, nerve-damaged, numb, the stump should stay
humorless, ummusical . . .)

•

My reading done, I get to see Paul do
his Act II: reluctant opening of eyes
—as if tearing himself from the pure Ineffable.
Affably, perhaps myopically, too, a bit,
he talks down his nose toward where I'm waiting:
sly nods, knowing winks at my Unconscious,
things to make me doubt I am who I think,

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have me think I'm a stranger to myself.
However distant his acquaintance with either,
he's willing to present us to each other.
That seems to be the offer. Think it over.

What I think is my hero doesn't play fair.
And doesn't understand me, not for a second.
I don't aspire to be an object of
his interest, or even noticed especially.
What I want is to hang around and admire,
and learn all his sharp intellectual moves,
those quick grips and nifty throws I can use
to flip the world over onto its back,
and hold it down until it cries out, Uncle!
What I think? Master protects disciple.
The slugger doesn't hit on the batboy.
And here he's put *me* in danger—from himself—
prevaricating interest in my poetry.
Oh, I'll go on admiring the guy, but never will
forgive him his treachery.
Is what I thought.

•

That, roughly, was fifty years ago,
and half these years Paul's been gone—and half
his mourners have by now outrun mourners
of their own, and taken cover in the ground.
And so here one is between two corteges,
Paul's past and the present writer's assembling
(slowly, gentlemen!) somewhere up ahead.
Well, Paul had his decade or so in the sun,
his nearly fifteen years of fame
—which at this distance seem foreshortened
to Andy's famous "fifteen min."
The times took his hand and walked with him
a while, a mile. And then walked on.
His coronary when it came along
was wholehearted, unrefusable.

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Joyce Carol Oates

Immobility Defense

First, you run! Fly!
Turn yourself inside out!
Another time you escape.

Unless this is the time
you don't escape.

•

Well, rend the air with noise!
Screech, *squeal*, *squawk*, *scream*.
You're equipped, use it, hurry!
Bleat, *cry*. *Caterwaul*.
Confuse your pursuer!
Flap, *flail*, *flutter*, *beat* your wings!
Your gills fibrillate oxygen.
You burrow into luscious black muck.
Hide in that thicket, like debris.
Fly into the nearest tree.
Plunge head-on into a hole.

You may run farther if there is a farther.

Unless this is the time you don't.

•

Are your feathers not exquisite camouflage in the open field?
Is your fur not exquisite camouflage in the shadowed forest?
Is your speckled hide not exquisite camouflage in the speckled sun?

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Until this time.
This final time.

When unexpectedly there's—quiet.
In the grip of jaws—quiet.
You freeze. Gone dreaming.
Your rapid heartbeat slows.
Such beauty in stillness!
Your glazing eyes turn inward, *I'm rethinking this all.*

For what has been *life*?
Appetite, terror, mating. Sleep
and appetite, terror, mating. Sleep
and now pain?
You don't feel it.
Your brain is shutting down like a blackboard being washed clean.
Your heart continues to beat. Gently.
Your blood continues to pulse but not hotly.
Your nerves gone loose, cottony as string.

Whatever these teeth devouring you alive,
you seem almost to welcome them.
Hiding in your body
until your body's gone into the Other.

Such peace I never dreamt.
Until this time.

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Two Poems by Scott Cairns

Loves

Magdalen's Epistle

Of Love's discrete occasions, we
observe sufficient catalogue,
a likely sounding lexicon

pronounced so as to implicate
a wealth of difference, where reclines
instead a common element,

itself quite like those elements
partaken at the table served
by Jesus on the night he was

betrayed—like those in that the bread
was breakable, the wine was red
and wet, and met the tongue with bright,

intoxicating sweetness, quite
like . . . wine. None of what I write arrives
to compromise that sacrament,

the mystery of spirit graved
in what is commonplace and plain—
the broken, brittle crust, the cup.

Quite otherwise, I choose instead
to bear again the news that each,
each was still *itself*, substantial

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in the simplest sense. By now, you
will have learned of Magdalen, a name
recalled for having won a touch

of favor from the one we call
the son of man, and what you've heard
is true enough. I met him first

as, mute, he scribbled in the dust
to shame some village hypocrites
toward leaving me unbloodied,

if ill-disposed to taking up
again a prior circumstance.
I met him in the house of one

who was a Pharisee and not
prepared to suffer quietly
my handling of the master's feet.

Much later, in the garden when,
having died and risen, he spoke
as to a maid and asked me why

I wept. When, at *any* meeting
with the Christ, was I not weeping?
For what? I only speculate

—brief inability to speak,
a weak and giddy troubling near
the throat, a wash of gratitude.

And early on, I think, some slight
abiding sense of shame, a sop
I have inferred more recently

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to do without. Lush poverty!
I think that *this* is what I'm called
to say, this mild exhortation

that one should still abide *all* love's
embarrassments, and so resist
the new temptation—dangerous,

inexpedient mask . . . of shame.
And, well, perhaps one other thing:
I have received some little bit

about the glib divisions which
so lately have occurred to you
as right, as necessary, fit—

that the body is something less
than honorable, say, in its
. . . appetites? That the spirit is

something pure, and—if all goes well—
potentially unencumbered
by the body's bawdy tastes.

This disposition, then, has led
to a banal and pious lack
of charity, and, worse, has led

more than a few to attempt some
soul-preserving severance—dire
mortifications, manglings, all

manner of ritual excision
undertaken to prevent the body's
claim upon the heart, or mind,

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or (utter blasphemy!) the spirit—
whatever name you fix upon
the supposéd *bodiless*.

I fear that you presume—dissecting
the person unto something less
complex. I think that you forget

you are not Greek. I think that you
forget the very issue which
induced the Christ to take on flesh.

All loves are bodily, require
that the lips part, and press their trace
of secrecy upon the one

beloved—the one, or many, endless
array whose aspects turn to face
the one who calls, the one whose choice

it was one day to lift my own
bruised body from the dust, where, it seems
to me, I must have met my death,

thereafter, this subsequent life
and late disinclination toward
simple reductions in the name

of Jesus, whose image I work
daily to retain. I have kissed
his feet. I have looked long

into the trouble of his face,
and met, in that intersection,
the sacred place—where body

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and spirit both reside in (see!)
in mutual obsession. Yes!
if you'll recall your Hebrew *word*

just long enough to glimpse in its
dense figure *power to produce*
you'll see as well the damage Greek

has wrought upon your tongue, stolen
from your sense of what is holy,
wholly good, fully animal—

the body which he now prepares.

The More Earnest Prayer of Christ

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly . . .
—Luke 22.44

His last prayer in the garden began, as most
of his prayers began—*in earnest*, certainly,
but not without distraction, an habitual . . . what?

Distance? Well, yes, a sort of distance, or a mute
remove from the genuine distress he witnessed
in the endlessly grasping hands of multitudes

and, often enough, in his own embarrassing
circle of intimates. Even now, he could see
these where they slept, sprawled upon their robes or wrapped

among the arching olive trees. Still, something new,
unlikely, uncanny was commencing as he spoke.
As the divine in him contracted to an ache,

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a throbbing in the throat, his vision blurred, his voice
grew thick and unfamiliar; his prayer—just before
it fell to silence—became uniquely earnest.

And in that moment—perhaps because it was so
new—he *saw* something, had his first taste of what
he might become, first pure taste of the body, and the blood.

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Two Poems by Adriana Szymanska

My Daughter and Franz Kafka

My daughter screams: "I don't believe in t h i s God!
I don't believe in any God!"
And she escapes into tears over Kafka's *Castle*.
My daughter is eighteen and she amazes me
with her consummate femininity.
But when she waves her loud disbelief
like a purple scarf before my eyes,
she is still a little girl with a thumb in her mouth.
What can I tell her, God?
That she is wrong? That you do e x i s t,
distant and stern, or maybe close and merciful?
That this whole magnificent world between her
and You is only brittle smoky glass?
Because she believes in Kafka, wandering in the evening
in the labyrinths of his imagination.
I suspect that before she falls asleep she talks secretly with K.,
telling him how to reach the Truth.
So I don't say a word, I only look into her tearful eyes
as if into an aquarium full of green light.

My little grown-up daughter
in her mini-dress dances in the morning before a mirror,
while a smiling Kafka watches her from a bookshelf.
Then suddenly
he speaks to her in his deep, charming bass:
"You know what? We'd better check that. I'm almost sure
He is there. Behind the last door of the mirror."

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In a Photo Album

This is me, nineteen years old, on a bridge in Wrocław,
and here against a wing of the castle in Ghent.
Here in a boat on the Rica Lake, here on the rocks
on the Black Sea.
Here on a donkey with the Infant, here on a horse named Baden,
and here in the shade of the centuries, in divine Florence.
Just think, I have collected all this for you so that
when at last you come, when you stand over me
like God's Messenger in the extraordinary brightness of an
ordinary Friday,
I will give myself to you smiling, crying, mutely screaming.
Because this girl, foolishly nineteen, is gone,
gone is the one on the lake and on the Black Sea,
this one on the donkey and that one on the horse.
So take this paper, these stiff poses, page after page
collected confidently in the bulging album. Touch the smooth
skin
of my likeness, bloodless, but still waiting,
feverish with belief, yearning for your eyes
that tame the beast in me.
Only the voracious body dies. Only the fragile sweetness of
beauty
grows numb. I, the whole unaltered I,
live carefree in the cardboard frames, heedless
of Eternity. From the first acts of infancy belonging
to you.
Here is my immortality bound in the ox's hide.
Here is my supercolor hell.

—translated from the Polish
by Ewa Hryniewicz-Yarbrough

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Audit

Richard Stern

Constitutionally, temperamentally, against the grain of his better intentions, his background and even many of his actions, Wendell Spear, the film critic and historian, was avaricious.

Well, not quite. *Avarice* didn't do justice to Spear's feelings about money. After his wife Vanessa's death, money became a kind of companion to him, almost a child. The nurturing and growth of his small wealth brought him a profound ease and—though he knew this was absurd—pride.

Every morning, waking, he reached for his bedside phone, pressed its memory button and, successively, the numbers which summoned the electronic voices which reported the status of his accounts. The rare times when there was a glitch in either the reporting system or his account, Spear was gripped by anxiety and anger until he could reach his broker's office and learn what, thank God, had, so far, been a reporting error which, for anxious minutes, appeared to be either a catastrophic decline or an embezzlement.

When, in late August, a letter from the Treasury Department informed him that he was subject to a tax audit, Spear felt a terror unlike anything he'd known since Vanessa's death.

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Why, after all his placid, solitary years in his Malibu Canyon cabin had he been singled out? Dismay, astonishment, fear, rage.

The letter was personalized to the extent of specifying the year the IRS was auditing, 1993, and the areas of its concern, his Contributions and Business Expenses. It also indicated the place and time of the audit, the Federal Building on Los Angeles Street, and the auditor's sinister, comic name, G. Whipp.

Spear's longtime accountant, Zack Wool, filed his taxes from Los Angeles, where Spear had lived till his move to Malibu. It accounted for the location of the audit and for another dimension of his anxiety, the hour's drive on the freeways. The freeways were the incarnation, or rather impetrification, of his fears. Until the audit was over, he knew he wouldn't enjoy a single night of peaceful sleep.

He called Wool's office. Frances, the secretary, said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Spear. He's in South America."

"In flight?"

"Vacation. He takes September off."

"It's August."

"He'll be back September 20."

"The audit's September 18."

"I can request a postponement. They're good about granting them."

"I may not last till September 18. I'll go myself."

That afternoon Spear dug out of a closet the manila envelopes which held his 1993 tax forms, checks, receipts, bankbooks, VISA and Discover bills and went to work.

After two hours' immersion, he went out to the terrace from whose eaves still hung the inverted blue bottles which, so long ago, Vanessa had filled with sugar water for hummingbirds. (The hummingbirds had departed with her.) Now looking over the small lawn bordered with chaparral, palms and cypress, he prepared himself for the actual hearing. He'd wear his oldest decent suit, blue, a frayed blue shirt and a faded blue tie. No, the wrong look. Too much blue. Too much

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attention to color coordination. The artist disguises his art; the con man also. He needed a shirt that clashed, not enough to agitate a color-sensitive auditor, but enough to suggest an old widower, careful but a bit at sea. Maybe an off-white shirt with black stripes. No, these were prison colors. The lemon-green with a few honorable white threads at the collar. For shoes, the ugly, broad-toed ones with worn-down heels. He'd polish them to show how careful he was of his old, unfashionable things. Whipp would see a decent, even fastidious man, straightforward, plain, a not-quite-with-it man, a bald, sexagenarian widower keeping up as well as he could.

Would the auditor sniff something askew? After all, he knew Spear's income, tiny compared to many in Malibu, but probably three times bigger than Whipp's own. *I'm saving for my granddaughter, Mr. Whipp. I'm not a spender. I skimp, but not on taxes. I pay what I owe. My accountant, Zack Wool, is descended from a Confederate general. He's stricter than a ruler. I'm sure he makes me pay more than I should. I'm hoping to get a refund.*

Spear went back to the checks and receipts, expenses and charities, almost thirty of them, to some of which—thinking to avoid just such an encounter—he'd given $10 or less. The more checks, the more scrupulous the taxpayer and the wearier the auditor. In 1993, however, there were several unusual deductions. The biggest was the gift of part of his film library and filmography to Claremont College. The appraiser—*Deirdre Seale, Mr. Whipp, a respectable professional*—had valued the library at $7,426.00. Was this the nail on which the IRS wanted to hang him? He got out a copy of Ms. Seale's letter, a two page account of her credentials and a detailed description of the gift. Detailed, yes, but impregnable? Perhaps Ms. Seale had left a trail of overassessments which the omniscient Whipp followed?

Omniscient.

Who knew what Whipp knew? The myrmidons of the IRS had immense resources, terrifying power. About money, they might know everything—more than everything! Spear had heard a hundred horror stories: people, companies, studios

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tied up in decades of litigation, tax penalties mounting at each stage of appeal.

Beyond appeal, beyond litigation, beyond impoverishment, loomed prison.

Spear knew prisons. He'd seen Jimmy Cagney, George Raft, Humphrey Bogart, Wallace Beery and Burt Lancaster behind iron bars; he'd seen brutal wardens, guards with guns ready, willing and eager to shoot prisoners diverting themselves momentarily from sticking cell-made shivs into each others' flanks. Gangs, extortion, rape. Could a man like himself last a day in such a place? Three years ago, Roger, the grandson of his friend Alice, the cashier at the Mobil station, had been sent away for six months: reckless driving and endangerment. Said Alice, "It turned him around, Mr. S. Fellow in the next cell, a stockbroker, put him onto books. Now he talks of nothing but learning the Latin language. I asked him, 'Does this mean you want to be a priest?' 'Just the opposite,' he tells me. Whatever that means." Roger, an oil-stained giant, had grown up in the service station, not, like Spear, in an English rectory filled with the Latin books Roger apparently craved. (Although he hadn't read one in twenty years, Spear had not given Claremont his father's red and gold Loeb Library Classics.) A minimum-security prison with three square meals a day and stockbroker companions was a step up for him, but for Spear, who lived in the ease of unsupervised, self-pampered solitude, it would be living death.

The IRS district office was on the twelfth floor of the old Federal Office Building. For his 9 A.M. appointment, Spear was on the Santa Monica Freeway at 7:00 and on Los Angeles Street at 8:15. Carrying his schoolboy's briefcase stuffed with rubberbanded papers, he walked around the block to compose himself.

On the twelfth floor, he gave his name to a lovely, already weary black woman who told him to "sit in reception," a bleak beige room with three rows of blue plastic chairs and windows so begrimed Spear did not bother trying to see what could have been a fine view west over the city to the Pacific. Briefcase

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on his knees, he sat on the blue plastic seat like a penitent.

A small elderly black man sat two seats away. "Morning," he said. He wore bright green slacks and a Hawaiian sport shirt; no blue suit and frayed shirt for him. This was Southern California; not even funeral directors wore blue suits.

"Good morning."

"You being audited?"

"I'm afraid so."

"They wanting twenty-five hundred bucks from me."

"Pretty steep."

"My cousin, he took my social security, went round the Southwest hanging paper." He tapped a vinyl briefcase. "I got copies two of his checks."

"Looks like you're home free then."

"Think so?"

"I do," said Counselor Spear.

"Mr. McKeeney?" A stout Chinese woman in a lavender pantsuit stood in the doorway.

"That's me," said the man, rising.

Spear watched them disappear round an L-leg of a corridor. The elevator discharged a wheelchair which rolled toward the reception area. Spear looked, then looked away from its occupant, a tiny white man in a brown corduroy workshirt and blue pants from which hung tiny shoes. "Not enough that God has afflicted the poor fellow, the IRS has to pursue him." Then he heard what was surely his name, "Mr. Sthpear," uttered in a sharp, high-pitched voice.

Spear looked at the wheelchair. "Mr. Whipp?"

The man had an almost normal-sized head which was jammed, neckless, onto small corduroyed shoulders. "Pleath follow me."

Spear rose, his seventy inches heavy with normality. He followed the double-wheeled throne of his auditor down the long corridor and into a cubicle. Mr. Whipp's arm pointed him to a wooden chair. He wheeled himself behind the desk. On a table to his left were a telephone, a small American flag on a stand and a six inch plastic Venus de Milo.

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"Well, Mr. Sthpear," he said with a pleasant smile, "Thall we begin?"

"I'm ready."

Whipp opened a manila envelope in front of him. "I'm going to wead you your wighth."

The familiar phrase, even in Whipp's infantile phonemes, coiled around Spear's already contracted heart. "You thould have copieth of thith." Spear nodded. "In thwee or four weekth, I'll mail you a weport. If you don't agwee wiv it, you can call me or my thupervithor. If we don't thatithfy you, you can appeal. If—"

"Yes, I did read that, Mr. Whipp."

"Have you ever been audited before?"

"No."

Whipp drew a paper from the folder. He said kindly, "It theemth you were—back in 1968."

"Really?" Vanessa had done their taxes, but yes, he remembered something. Hadn't the auditor come to their house in Beverly Glen? "My wife handled our finances. I'm a widower now."

"I thee." This was not an expression of sympathy: Whipp was looking at papers which specified the date of Vanessa's death. "Now I will wead you a litht of thingth. Would you pleath anthwer yeth or no to each? Have you any income from weal ethtate?"

"No."

"Overtheath invethtmenth?"

"Only the royalties described in the return."

"Drug-dealing?"

"No."

"Mining?"

"No."

"Currenthy twanthactionth?"

"I don't speculate. Except for the investments listed."

At each of Spear's answers, Whipp checked off boxes. He put the paper on a pile and pulled out a long pad of yellow paper. "Thall we begin with Contributionths?"

Spear undid the leather thongs on his briefcase and with-

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drew the envelope in which he'd put charitable checks, receipts and acknowledgments.

Whipp said, "There ith the matter of the car you donated to the half-way houthe." For years, Spear had given his old cars to an ex-actor who ran a halfway house for ex-prisoners and addicts. The actor tuned up the cars, then sold them to support the house. "I think the appraithal ith too high."

"It's his appraisal, not mine."

"I think it'th too high. Do you know the Blue Book appraithal of an eighty-thwee Buick?"

"No."

"I'll look it up. I think we have to go by that."

"It had an exceptionally good stereo system." An exaggeration.

"It'th hard to appraith thingth. Do you have any retheits for the thound thystem?"

"I probably did," lied Spear, "but I don't know where they are."

Whipp wrote on the lined pad. "I thee. We'd better uthe the Blue Book." He looked up as if awaiting Spear's approval. Spear nodded, and bending low over the pad, Whipp wrote more, his fist encircling the ballpoint pen as if writing required every bit of his strength and concentration. "Now we thould look at the donathon of the film bookth and—thith ith a new word to me—filmogwaphy." His accent was on *gwaph*. "To the college libwary."

Spear said, "I have the appraiser's letters and the college's thank-you note here."

"Your accountant thubmitted them."

"Is there a problem?"

"Ith a filmo-gwaphy movieth?"

"Mine's a detailed, alphabeticized description of films, categorized by genre."

"What is *genre*?"

"Type of film. Comedy, tragedy. Whatever."

"I thee." His neckless head bobbed in appreciative comprehension. "I think we can acthept thith appraithal."

"Fine," said Spear, surprised at the depth of his delight.

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Whipp wrote several more lines, then looked up. "Charitieth? You have lotth of thmall oneth, thome under Mithellaneouth. Of courth, people can't document everything. Like you go to church and put in a few dollarth."

"That's right," said Spear who hadn't been to church since he'd listened to his father's tortured sermons forty-odd years ago.

Item by item, the examination continued, Whipp writing away, Spear occasionally contesting, Whipp nodding, agreeing, asking for documentation. "The IREth won't accthept undocumented twanthacthionth."

"I understand. I wish I'd kept everything."

"I know that'th hard to do."

An hour, two hours, three hours, Whipp and Spear faced each other over the checks, receipts, appraisals and assessments scattered over the desk.

"You mutht be getting hungry. Wouldn't it be better to make another appointment?"

"Lord God no, Mr. Whipp. I'd like to get it over now, if that's all right."

"All right. We're almotht finithed."

The final twenty minutes went by in a blur. Drained, Spear agreed to everything, but he had the impression that most of his claims were being accepted. What a good, decent person Whipp was. How beautifully he handled his deformity and handicaps. He touched Spear's heart. When they discussed the expenses of a trip Spear had made to a film festival in San Francisco, Whipp said, "Than Fwanthithco ith thuch a beautiful thity. I wath there oneth, for four dayth. It wath my happietht perthonal time."

The drive home on the freeway and coast highway was actually pleasant: few cars, much relief. Home, Spear slept, till wakened by the phone. "Mr. Sthpear?"

"Mr. Whipp. Is anything wrong?"

"You left your briefcathe here."

"How careless of me."

"What thall I do with it?"

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"Why don't you keep it as a souvenir?" Spear almost said. "I'll have to come get it, unless you could possibly mail it to me. Of course I'd reimburse you."

"I might be able to do that," said Whipp. "Let me athk at our potht offith."

It happened that Jennifer, Spear's granddaughter, had been sent down from San Francisco to do a deposition at the Roybal Building across the street from the Federal Office Building. She was spending the night with Spear, a rare treat for him. She said she'd pick up the briefcase during her lunch break.

That night, she said, "The people in the office here all know him. At least they've seen him in the street being carried into taxis."

"What did he say to you?"

"Not very much. He was embarrassed, I think, a bit gruffer than he might have been with you. All he said was, 'I have it right here.' Strange lisp. Maybe because his throat's constricted."

"I'm sure he was delighted to see you. I don't imagine he gets a chance to talk to attractive girls." For Spear, Jennifer was lovelier than any film star, a solid, pink-cheeked Natalie Wood or Winona Ryder, or like the eighteen-year-old Hannah Arendt as she was spotted in the Freiburg lecture hall by the swinish genius Heidegger. "You made his week," said Spear. "And you probably improved my case." He decided to send Jennifer whatever refund he got. "It makes me feel good about technology. Fifty or sixty years ago, Whipp wouldn't have been able to get a job in a circus; they don't use cripples. He'd have been human junk."

"He makes the case for affirmative action," said Jennifer. "One up for the US of A."

Three and a half weeks later, Whipp's report arrived, six pages long and so ambiguously phrased that Spear couldn't tell whether he owed money or was getting some back. There were also spelling errors and such peculiarities as credit for a safe-deposit box which Spear hadn't listed, let alone claimed. The upshot, though, was that Whipp disagreed with much of

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what Spear thought he'd agreed to, and Spear owed thirty-four hundred dollars, including two years' interest. It was not a great sum of money for him, and by agreeing to accept the assessment, that would end it, but something held him back. He felt his new friend wasn't such a friend after all, and this made him both angry and sad. It also occurred to him that if he agreed to Whipp's refusal to recognize, say, the tax deductibility of a film festival, then other Whipps could question other returns, past and future. The thirty-four hundred dollars could be the first of many installments.

He called Zack Wool. "How was Machu Picchu?"

"They keep it up very nicely. What can I do you for, Wendell? How was the audit? Sorry I wasn't there, though I'm sure you handled it well. Plus if I'd gone, it would have cost you a bundle."

"I *thought* it went all right, till I got the report just now. The guy went back on everything I assumed he agreed to. I owe them thirty-four hundred dollars. Not a fortune—"

"If you don't owe it, it's thirty-four hundred too much."

"It's the business of questioning my way of life. If I'd been buying hardware instead of watching movies, he would have accepted everything without question. My business is seeing films. If it looks like fun, let him try writing about them. Incidentally, he's a crippled dwarf, in a wheelchair. I actually liked him. I'm hurt he turned his back on me. I don't know what to do."

"Appeal."

"Is it worth it?"

"Is your time so valuable?"

"My leisure's valuable."

"Is it worth seventeen hundred bucks an hour? It'll only take a couple of hours."

"Plus the ride from Malibu."

"If we win, that's deductible."

Wool had spent the weekend in Santa Barbara and said he'd pick Spear up at his cabin.

"Make it the Mobil station down the highway. Then you

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don't have to drive up the canyon. I leave my car there, they know me."

The appointment with Whipp was at 1 P.M.. Wool said he'd pick Spear up at noon, cutting it too close for Spear who liked to be early for appointments. He was down at the station talking to Alice at 11:30. At 11:40 he started looking up the road for Wool's car. At ten of, he began cursing.

"What's up, Mr. Spear," called Roger, who between stints at the gas pump was reading a Latin grammar behind the cash register counter, shoes up on a five gallon oil can.

"I don't like people who aren't on time. It's a phobia."

"When was he supposed to be here?"

"Noon."

"It's ten of."

"*Tempus fugit.*" A week ago, Roger asked Spear if he'd consider giving him Latin lessons. "I haven't read Latin in years. The only thing I'm less qualified to do is train you to be an astronaut." He used the station phone to call Wool's office. "Where's your boss, Frances? We have an appointment at one."

"He said he'd be picking you up, Mr. Spear. I know he'll be there."

"Can you call his car?"

"He won't use cellular phones, says they're carcinogenic."

"I've got a good mind to drive myself."

"I don't blame you Mr. Spear. Mr. Wool is soo deliberate it's exasperating. But he is reliable."

"I'll give him five minutes, then I'm taking off. He can meet me there if he likes. G. Whipp, twelfth floor."

"I'll tell him, sir, but please hold just a bit, I'm sure he's on his way."

Spear looked down the road, straining to pick up signs of Wool's Lexus. Nothing. He started to back out his car when he heard something. Shutting off the motor, he looked down the road and saw a black dot.

Wool offered no apology. In fact, he said he wanted to drop by his office to pick up Spear's file.

Suppressing the rage that burst from his anxiety, Spear said

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coldly, "There's no time for that, Zack. I don't want to be late. I like to have a few minutes to compose myself, and I don't think I'll have them."

"Whatever you say, Wendell. I'll just wing it."

On the coast highway, Spear stewed at Wool's molasses pace and over-caution. Every time a car passed, honking to get Wool over to the right, Spear wanted to strangle him. "He shouldn't be allowed to have a Lexus."

Wool picked up speed on the freeway. Cars still passed them every other second, but the traffic was light, and there was parking space a block from the Federal Building. Spear scrambled along at a pace that caused the much younger Wool to huff and puff.

In the reception area, Spear, pretending to look through his papers, sat a row away from Wool. When he saw the wheelchair at the end of the corridor, he got up, opened the glass door and greeted Whipp, who today was in tie and shirt. His shoes too, looked new, shiny, tiny black Oxfords which hung from his withered legs. "Mr. Wool. Mr. Whipp."

Wool leaned over and took Whipp's small hand. "I'm the signature at the bottom of the page. You may have seen it at the bottom of other returns."

How tight the blue tie looked on Whipp's necklessness. He was balder than Spear recalled, the remnants of light brown hair like torn curtains on the sides of his head. He did seem more comfortable today, perhaps knowing that there'd be no shocked looks on a strange face. He knew that Spear would have prepared the accountant for his appearance. "Pleathe follow me." He rolled up the corridor, going this time to a door with an alarm system whose buttons he pressed. "Could you pleathe get the door?" Spear opened it, then followed the chair left and right into Whipp's cubicle. "Thame offithe," he said. There was, though, a new ornament, a pumpkin with an unlit candle inside. Had Whipp carved it himself or had some grateful client brought it for Halloween?

"I've done a little wethearch on allowable deductionth for authorth. You are a full-time author, Mr. Sthpear, aren't you?"

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"I suppose so. I do sometimes lecture, but basically I am a film critic and historian."

"A hithtorian ith an author?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Spear is modest, Mr. Whipp," said Wool. "He's a very distinguished film critic and historian. His main business is this form of authorship."

"That'th what I thought. Therth a cathe here"—he picked up a xeroxed page—"3/26/71 UTh Dithtrict Court, thentral Dithtrict California. I can make a copy for you. Thith man thpent thwee hundred and thirty-five dayth in New York Thity pwepawing a book on D.W. Gwiffith. I know you know who he ith. I've theen hith filmth mythelf. *Birth of a Nathon*. I'm not thure it could be thown now." He looked up as if asking for Spear's professonal opinion.

"It strains the conscience, but it is shown to film students."

"Gwiffith'th paperth were in New York, thith man lived in California. He claimed twavel and living expentheth for the taxable year. Owiginally, the claimth were dithallowed, but, on appeal, it wath dethided that the expentheth were deductible. They were not non-deductible exthpenditureth for the improvement of a capital athet. If you'd written a book or had wetheived an advanthe for a book about the film fethtival you attended, there would be no quethtion—bathed on thith cathe—that it wath deductible."

"But films are my business," said Spear, "Whether I write about them immediately or not."

Whipp smiled his sweet smile and nodded. "I underthtand. I underthtand that it'th your bithineth to know filmth, but here'th another cathe that applieth. A high thchool teacher of Fwench went to Fwanthe to improve her Fwench. The court dethided that her twavel expentheth could not be deducted thince thhe wath not *wequired* to go to Fwanthe. It wath her choithe, her pleathure. Though thhe wath a Fwench teacher."

"Absurd and unfair," said Spear. "She'd give her pupils the benefit of her new knowledge of the language and the country."

Whipp opened his palms helplessly. "Yeth, I underthtand,

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but I can only do what the IREth allowth me to do. They would not allow me to deduct your expentheth in Than Fwanthithco unleth you had a contract to write about it."

Spear started to speak, but Wool touched his arm, "Our contention is that Mr. Spear's status as a film critic and historian depends upon his keeping up with what's going on in films around the world. If he doesn't do that, there will be no contracts, no invitations to write articles or books. It's not a question of not being required by an employer to go to such festivals. Mr. Spear is self-employed."

"If I don't keep up, I won't be employed at all. Don't you see, Mr. Whipp, that you're undermining my very way of life?"

Whipp shook his head. "I wethpect your way of life very much, Mr. Sthpear. I'm thure that you are a very fine and important critic. I underthtand how important it ith for you to keep up with filmth. It'th jutht that I can't thee that your cathe ith ath clothe to the Gwiffith cathe ath it ith to the Fwench teacher'th."

"What would it take to convince you, Mr. Whipp?"

The little shoulders shrugged. "I will do more wethearch and thee if I can find a cathe clother to yourth. I've had only one other author in my time here, and hith cathe wath different."

"Curious. What was his name?"

Wool said, "He can't tell you that, Wendell."

"Let'th thee, you were in Than Fwanthithco from February 11th to the 15th. Do you have thome kind of journal or diary of that time?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Keeping journals is part of my work."

"Very good." Spear handed over the notebook. Whipp looked it over, turned the pages and handed it back. "It'th a bit hard to wead. Could you pleathe wead the entry for, thay, February 13th?"

Spear took the notebook and began to read a description of his breakfast and said, "I'd better go to what counts."

"Pleathe."

Spear read a section about a new Chinese film, an account

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of the plot along with speculations about its political and social undercurrents, the quality of the acting and directing, the beauty of the editing and color. He read for two or three minutes till Whipp said, "That'th a very beautiful dethcription of the film. However, there ith no hour by hour account of your activitieth."

"I was watching the film, Mr. Whipp."

"Yeth, I know that. But the quethtion ith what part of your day wath pleathure, what part wath improving your thtudieth ath a cwitic and what part wath actually wemunerated. That ith, bithineth. That'th the difficult quethtion."

"Mr. Whipp, do you enjoy your work?"

"Yeth, I do, Mr. Sthpear."

"I do too. Pleasure, then, isn't the criterion. If I were buying or selling nuts and bolts, there'd be no question about my expenses. Films are my nuts and bolts. They may sound like pleasure—they are pleasure—but they're how I earn a living. I'm not just talking about the money now, Mr. Whipp. I can afford to pay the IRS what it wants, but I can't afford to give it my life. It's my life that it's questioning. That you're questioning. The serious business of my life."

"I'm not quethtioning your bithineth, Mr. Sthpear."

"I agree, Wendell. Mr. Whipp knows that you're a serious critic of films, but," Wool turned to Whipp, "Mr. Spear has put our case well, if more emotionally than I might."

"I underthand that."

"All his experience goes into what he writes, and though we know that some experience, say, taking a drive or a walk is nondeductible, going to a film festival or doing research for an article or book should be."

"I agwee with you."

"I have done the man's taxes for thirty years. I do the taxes of many film people. You've probably seen my signature. I don't let my clients get away with things. With Wendell Spear, I have no worries. He's not a person who tries to get away with anything."

Spear felt himself flushing. Of course he tried to get away with things. He was only less bold than others, more fearful

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of the consequences. There were drops of sweat in Wool's brow furrows, gray hairs curled out of the inverted crescents of his eyebrows. Wool was worked up. "If he does a review for a local paper and gets twenty-five dollars for it, he notes it down. He is what you call a straight arrow."

"You might thay a weal Sthpear," said Whipp smiling.

Spear smiled too. What a little card he was. A sort of critic, too, observing the actors who performed their evasions in front of him.

"My hope is that we can resolve our problems here and now. If not . . ."

"You can appeal to my thupervithor." Whipp sounded not only sympathetic but encouraging. "And if that doethn't work, the taxth board. They may thee your cathe ath you thee it." Wide went the little palms, wide the smile. Spear surged with affection for him. If things were different, they might be friends, though Whipp's friends—if he had them—would have their hands full lifting his chair and him, helping him dress, helping him in the bathroom.

Two days later, Whipp's revised examination report was in his mailbox. It was clear that no midnight oil had been burned. The only difference from the first report was that he allowed Spear two per diems at the film festival: sixty-eight dollars. Zack Wool's bill would quadruple that. At this rate, the appeal process would cost a fortune.

Disappointed, even angry, still, once again, Spear could not bring himself to dislike the auditor. He debated calling him up to remonstrate or even plead with him to see his side of things. "You're suggesting that I don't go to festivals or do archival research since I can review films or lecture about them without going or researching. Don't you—won't you—see that the quality of the reviews and lectures will be lower? Is that what you—or the IRS—want to do, lower the quality of a person's work? It almost makes someone like *me*—" Spear was talking out loud to the trees—"an old-fashioned liberal, an admirer of Attlee and Harold Wilson, FDR and Harry

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Truman, want to side with Republicans." If the green palms, so loftily at home against the blue sky, said anything, it was "pay the two dollars."

Spear took the mail into his study, signed the form which said that he agreed with the assessment and would no longer contest or appeal it and wrote out a check for the full amount. Then he inked a star by the sentence about not contesting or appealing and wrote in the space provided for Other Comments.

I sign this agreement and pay the full amount required but wish to go on record here that I disagree with the Auditor's interpretation of my claim. If I had the energy I used to have, I would pursue the matter and believe that I could substantiate my case in tax court. I say this without any feeling of animus towards the Auditor, Mr. G. Whipp, whom I found to be a person of humanity.

Wendell R. Spear

A week later, Frances, Wool's secretary, called him. "Mr. Wool wants to know if you heard from the auditor yet."

"I should have let him know, Frances. I did. There was no change to speak of. I mailed in the check."

"Do you want to speak to him?"

"I won't bother him, Frances. I followed my instinct. And my fatigue."

"Sounds smart to me."

"One of these days, Frances, I'm going to take you to lunch."

"I can't wait, Mr. Spear. I'll tell Mr. Wool. Not about the lunch."

A delightful little woman, divorced, if he remembered correctly. Maybe she'd be willing to go to lunch with Mr. Whipp. Who knew what that might lead to. The mysteries of companionship, or, for that matter, of solitude. Whipp seemed to be a happy man, as Spear was, perhaps because he too had the best wife of all, life itself.

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That evening, after his spaghetti and Napa Valley cabernet, Spear walked the canyon road under the stars. A Pacific wind had blown away the smog, the sky was thick with brightness. At least the audit, thank God, was over. "It was good for you," Spear told himself, almost as if he were his father in the rectory, backed by walls of literate wisdom, offering paternal instruction. "Everyone needs auditing."

Spear himself had been a strict auditor of those around him. His daughter, Jennifer's mother, had early turned from him, and, in a way, so had Vanessa. (Dying was the way.) As a critic too, he was famously strict, weighing every film against not only the greatest films, but the greatest novels. Some producers had stopped giving him passes.

I was harsher than the stars. No wonder everyone turned away from me. I didn't seek solitude, it was my penalty.

The Almighty, that Ultimate Auditor, had raked Whipp's tiny body, legs, torso, tongue, yet also had filled it with honey. Divine Bookkeeping, how bizarre.

Next day, hardly thinking, Spear fetched the twenty-six red and gold Latin volumes of the Loeb Classical Library from his shelves and drove them down to the Mobil station. Roger wasn't there, but his grandmother was. "I promised these books to Roger, Alice. They're Latin. I can't read them anymore."

Another oddity: Spear stopped making his morning calls to the electronic voices. When he finally did realize that he'd stopped, he erased their numbers from the phone's memory bank and substituted Jennifer's, the Mobil station's and—surprising himself again—his daughter's.

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Portfolio

Letters to the Mother

Elena del Rivero

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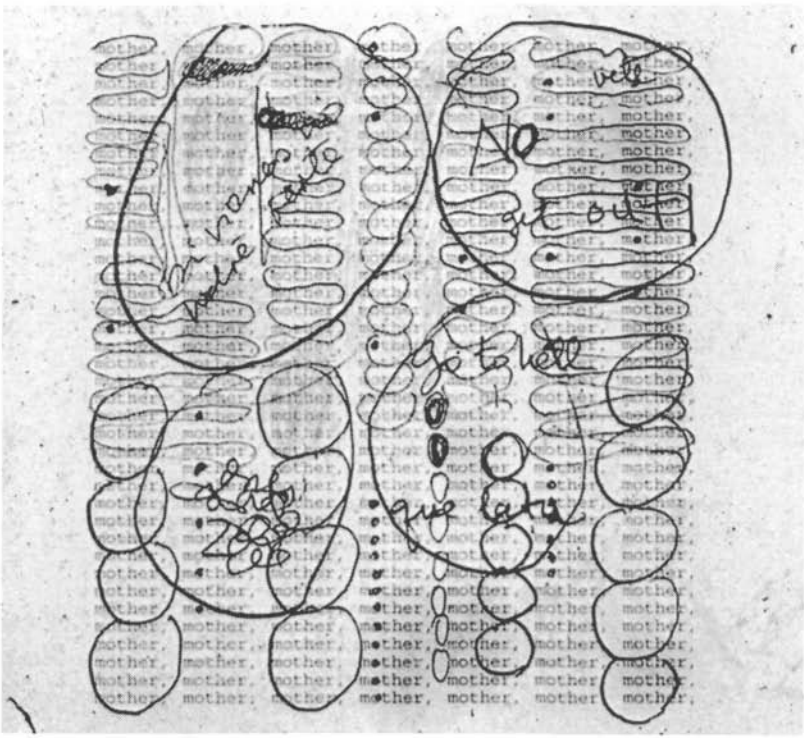
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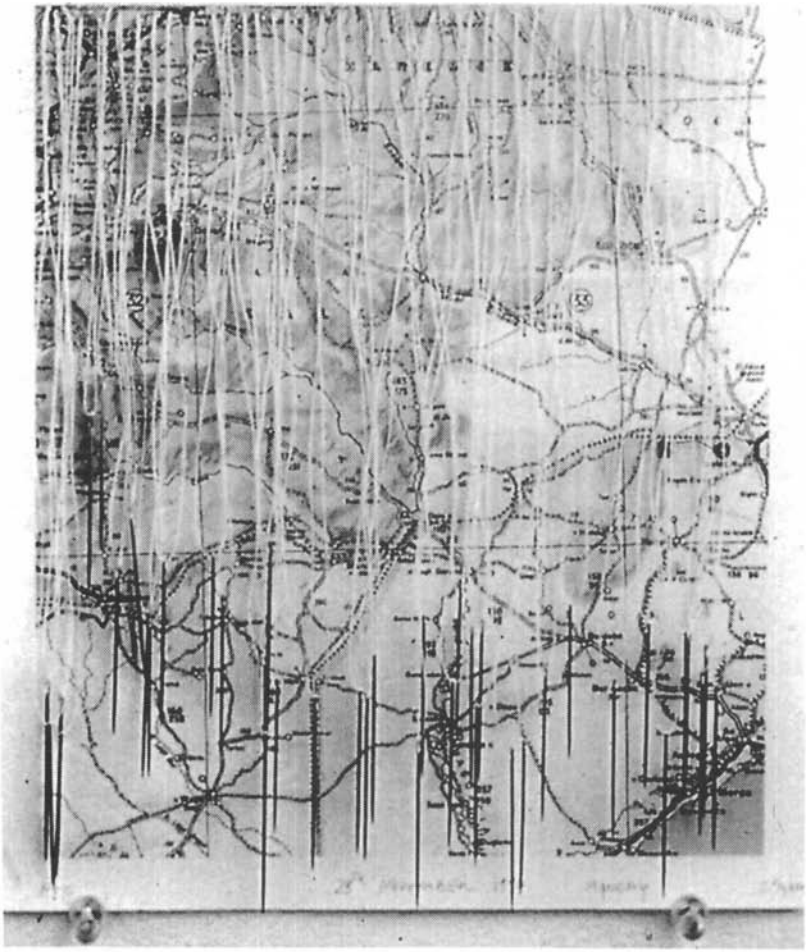

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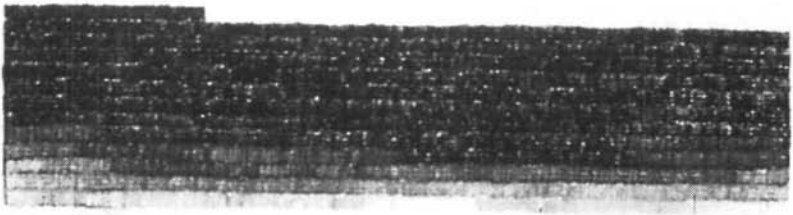

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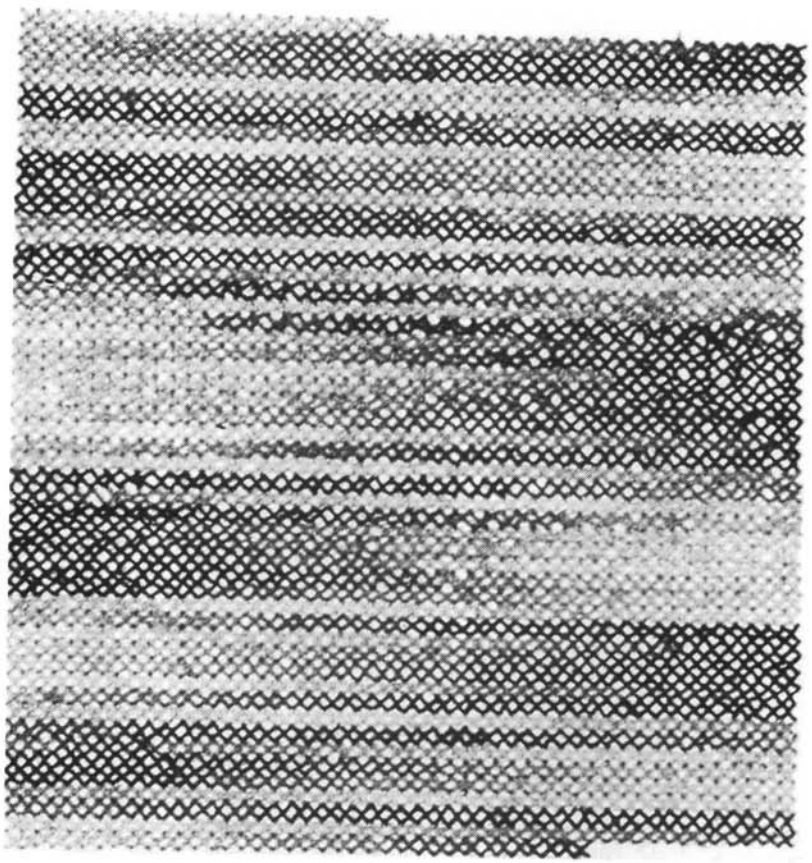

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The Storks

Laurel Anne Berger

On the Buka Islands off the coast of New Guinea there has recently been observed an unexplained surge in the population of the genus *Ciconia ciconia*, commonly known as the Indonesian stork. Not only has each generation greatly outnumbered its predecessors in aggregation, but the newer storks are also found, at maturity, to have surpassed the size and body weight of their progenitors by up to twenty percent, the most recent hatchlings having already, after only one month, far outgrown their parents and achieved a wingspan of 6.4 feet—an unprecedented length in all previously observed stork populations, including the mammoth South American eagle stork. Scientists have attempted to evaluate all environmental influences, assessing possible fluctuations in water temperature due to industrial activities, tidal disturbances and global warming; changes in rainfall; effects of regional nautical and aviation patterns; et cetera. They have also gathered meticulous data on any and all concurrent variations in adjacent species of both flora and fauna which might affect either the immediate or pandemic terraqueous ecosystem. While it has been discovered that the storks have begun to deplete the minnow and crab

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populations of their habitual feeding grounds, this has in no way checked their unaccountable growth as they have resorted to expanding their hunting territory, and to incorporating into their previously limited diet various species of insects abundantly available on the island and nearby archipelago. Determining the long-term impact that these kinds of feeding shifts may have on the food web is only one of the many challenges scientists confront as they attempt to address this peculiar circumstance.

You are swept up in your own affairs, minding your own business, more or less. Like most people you occasionally have dreams you are flying, sweeping over a vast bucolic countryside or tearing upwards through the layers of earth's atmosphere at dizzying speeds. Perhaps, like many people, you sometimes experience inexplicable waves of foreboding, a sense that doom is fashioning in the distance like clouds gathering for a storm.

After nine months of systematic research the team of two dozen experts—a group of scientists culled by the Center for International Scientific Research—has found absolutely no reasonable explanation for this dual phenomenon of accelerated growth and proliferation. The only forthcoming hypothesis was contributed not by one of the team, but by a Swiss ornithologist, Heister Klüute, whose theories about the role of a colony of Austrian goldfinches in the infamous 1979 Haapsalu snapping-turtle crisis has left him largely ignored by the mainstream scientific community. However, in light of his present singular observations pertaining to the stork's behavior and the widespread desperation for any possible illumination in the face of this obscure biological conundrum, Klüute's early theoretical works—namely his idea that the turtle extinction was, in fact, a *methodical* invasion and *extermination* orchestrated by an "aberrant cartel" of black-eyed goldfinches—are now undergoing reevaluation by the community.

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There is something you have forgotten, a dubious story you were told many years ago which has always seemed to be missing an ending. You have outgrown the story and moved on to other, newer stories, many of which you have fabricated for your own entertainment or supposed betterment. You no longer think about cabbage patches and their anomalous bundles.

Klüute's recent article in *Vogelkunde Vierteljahresschrift*—whose publication date was twice pushed back because of threats subsequently linked to Klüute's ex-wife, socialite Maria Strømpe-Klüute—has caused much controversy. In it Klüute asserts that while the stork's general behavior may seem standard when it is assessed according to its individual components, the same behaviors, when analysed *compositionally*, that is, as a series of sequences, will be found to be decidedly *abnormal*, and he claims, are indicative of extreme anxiety and *anger* on the part of the birds. The jerky vertical head movement—commonly referred to as the *Ciconi nod*—while normal when the stork is eating or transmitting warnings to the flock, is highly *abnormal* when it is preceded by grooming and is followed by the "puddle dance," the widely observed and (it is agreed) seemingly ceremonious shaking of water from the left leg.

Perhaps you assumed that when the job was done they were gone, disappeared—dead. This is what you were led to believe, though it was never put quite like that. Implication by omission. But you were lied to, and now your fate is sealed. For eons the mutation lay in waiting, a chromosomal smudge, microscopic, but with the power to release this seething fecundity, furious generation . . . and now you are no longer a child, and a silent explosion is taking place and they are coming back for you, gathering strength to take back what was once theirs, what for ages has been thanklessly received without acknowledgment of the rightful claims, their clear, ultimate entitlement. Their anger is massive; do not think you can escape. They will find you, will descend in a cloud and snatch

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you from your life like locusts plucking grain . . . huge cawing mothers, they will swaddle you in white sheets torn from a million bedrooms and sweep your overgrown body into the sky, beyond the clouds to where the air is cold and thin. Sheeted and dangling from a strong, angry bill, you may catch glimpses of kicking suit legs, a pair of sneakers bobbing from hairy ankles, spectacles and shoes in free fall, hats drifting on the wind . . . only fragments of the millions of swaying adult bodies swaddled and carried upwards by the labor of majestic wings, wings with the might of revolution, achieving the dream. High above the deepest valleys of the Pacific, surrounded by purposeful flapping, a snowstorm of feathers, you may already be woozy from lack of oxygen when the dropping begins, when the air will fill with dull moans and great cries, the thick cloud finally breaking open, darkening the air with justice. . . .

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The Garden of Fishes

Patricia Eakins

MY MASTER'S TEMPER were by spasms choleric, the spasms exacerbated by trespass, real or fancied, of his slaves, all of whom had had occasion to beg their fellows daub their backs with salve of rum and lard. Yet Dufay had raised up drivers to lash the hands to work, drivers on whom he palmed off most of the stewardship, that he might dedicate himself to advancement of universal knowledge. In sun and rain he tramped, far from the carries where his hands labored, peering under leaves, down burrows and up into nests to discover and name what creatures inhabited the wilderness parts of his domain.

An excellent draftsman, he delighted in sketching particulars of feather, fur and scale; the curve of claws, of teeth and beaks; the depths of eyes; the stretch and shove of limbs. On sketching expeditions to the rockiest, most surf-pounded tips of St. Michel, he spied from blinds he had had constructed on narrow ledges, to watch the sea birds fighting and fishing and rutting. (Some said he spied on the slaves, yes, on his own wife and children, in like manner, but I never saw him loiter in the shadows of human habitation.)

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From the age of five, I, PIERRE-BAPTISTE, whom the whites called Goody, had been laboring in the carries, coughing from the fire that burned off the leaves, stepping and stooping to chop the canes and singing between my gritted teeth to keep the bone-grinding pace. One day, M'sieu was riding his mare past the gang, his cockaded hat abob on Yolande's trot as he passed on his way to more tangled parts of our isle to sketch. His old servant trotted behind, one Christophe, called Long-Shanks, carrying the tools of his master's art. Alas, this worn-out soul, Christophe, keeled over. Without further adieu, he gave up the ghost and died.

"Hop to! Do you not leave Long-Shanks asprawl to be chewed by dogs," said M'sieu. "Yet let me have some strong, young, thick, black arms to wait on me at once, not again the tapered wrists of an aging yellow too refined to lift." And, rueful, he doffed his hat to Christophe.

PIERRE was called from the gang then, to lay down his bill and serve the master as porter. Wriggling joyful I was, who had no notion what a world of fetching made a body servant's work! Though I was then a strapping youth of ten, they had not yet given me a pair of pants. So, on the first day I turned my eyes from the cane to follow Yolande's tail, I did not look around me much, but only mulled over one single question: Would I get a pair of drawers? And when I did, that very eve, and not coarse Osnaburg, but silk, however faded, I strutted like a cock, and capered to the piping of the cane flute, the first capers I had cut in a very long time, for my smock had ceased to cover my privates, and I had learnt to shrink and cower over Johnny Fish.

Yet the drawers they had given me were pantaloons from years before, very baggy and covered with tufted ribbon loops. And these stale fancies gave great merriment to Pamphile, the master's son, and his stepmother, who swore they would grow my frizz to a full-bottom—"he would need no curling iron, and his nits would lose themselves in the maze"—and send me over the seas to court, to wait on the jades that yawned around the King. And they conceived a plot, to give me a name of antiquity, like a hero's in a tragedy, but M'sieu stamped his

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foot and swore, "I'll be damned if I learn a new name I must remember in the bush when I call on him to set a snare."

At night, in the dark, I lay with the fancy pants on my bed. With my fingers I tugged at the fall, so it tore, and, when I put on the pants, revealed Johnny Fish to what company was around.

"The stuff be so old it has rotted," I allowed.

So they gave me some drawers more plain and recent.

Once I was decently covered, I straightened my back and willingly shouldered the master's easel. I looked about me smartly, as he enjoined me over Yolande's withers, "Observe the curious cunning with which Nature has devised the creatures."

Dutifully, at first, I gaped at the mole, all fur and snout, with shovelly hands, that blindly hunches and wriggles a path like an endless pant leg to inhabit. How came he to St. Michel? Did he tunnel under the sea? Or was he pushing like a hungry root at Creation?

The island had not the variety of creatures, allowed M'sieu, that are known on the continents; yet creatures there were sufficient to preoccupy an inquiring philosopher, most particularly species of lizard and bird. And soon enough Pierre began to observe for the pleasure of the scrutiny. There particularly charmed him the red and green throat of one small lizard, puffed like a lady's coyly dropped handkerchief, as the creature took the sun. All languor he lolled till he cast his tongue to snag a fly! Servant no less than master marveled at the parakeets, their feathers brighter than flowers, cleaning themselves with their toes and hooking with their beaks the mites, smaller than lice, that inhabited the feathers' underbrush.

And the white egret, and in season, the blue heron.

Then there were fishes, more multivarious than birds, a garden of flesh in the waters, impossible to catch and hold, their form their movement, their movement one with the water they had their being in, the salty tear-drenched garden of the dead my godmothers had told me of, where I did not want to linger, though I ate any fish my elders caught, for I

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knew they took the fish with gratitude, and were forgiven.

The master did not trust the waters any more than I, though his dead slept beneath the earth, patient as seeds, waiting their time. Yet Dufay would not take off his shoes to wet his feet in the sea, let alone remove his clothes to wet his person. He did not like it, that was all; he did not care for it, so he said. 'Twas a slimy, endless chaos, he did not want it to impinge on his person.

Still, he must have fish to sketch and paint, if his natural history were to be complete. So it fell to me to catch these fish, yet without spoiling their form. So I must into the sea. If I would not do it, he would send me back to the fields. Yet I knew not how to comport myself in the sea. Nor did my master, yet he would teach me, by hypothesis, trying one expedient then another.

First, he had me dangled as bait on a rope he tied to a pole held by two very big men. And he lowered me choking and bellowing into the sea, till I learned to hold my breath. And he bade me agitate my arms and legs, like a human mill, and thus make myself an engine for motion in the sea. And when he saw my terrors had eased, he bade the two men throw me in, without the rope or the pole, so I must save myself with the motions I had learned. And in this manner I was trained to be nimble in the sea, to capture the fishes Dufay would sketch.

As I must paddle about with a spear in one hand, so I must keep the other, and both my legs, in motion, as an ox on a treadmill, to churn myself afloat. Yet—could I quiet my heart that pounded loud in my ears as depths rose to claim me, could I bring myself to open my eyes—then I saw, not the flesh-shrouded bones of the dead, but a paradise shimmering in veils of light. Surely the dead must be at peace in their garden of fish. I prayed I would be forgiven for plucking blossoms of flesh, not to eat, but for M'sieu to paint. Yet, the longer I spent in the garden of the dead, the less fearsome seemed the prospect of death. Was I not floating in a bliss that laved me, luxuriant and enjoyable? So Pierre splashed among his ancestors' souls, visible only as movement in water,

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and he celebrated their sweet repose, free of the whites who feared to set foot in their domain. Seeing how Pierre smiled when he rose for breath, the master clapped his hands and patted his slaveman's head.

"Good Goody," he said. "Good boy. Do you fetch me the fish, one by one, I will capture their likenesses."

Alas! Though I popped to the surface with a speared fish for him to sketch, or even a live one, squirming to escape and smothering in air, there was no way to capture the gracile essence save by immersion. So much the worse for M'sieu, his knowledge and his art. He did not revere the fish, and his stiff fillets, dull eyes already rotting, were not his truest portraits. He never even saw the hermaphrodite plants, with thick stalks and bright-petaled flowers, yet with roots emerging from the calyx, squirming and grasping at tiny fish, which they did feed into the calyx as hands would stuff a mouth. For M'sieu did not believe Pierre when Pierre spoke of them, and offered to bring one up, though it might be a pet of the dead. M'sieu did not believe a slaveman could discover creatures a master had not. "Tut tut!" he said.

And it was not just the underwater creatures M'sieu so blindly eschewed. For he took apoplectic fits at the sight of certain vermin, viz., the legions of rats that encamped in his fields to commandeer cane. Monsieur refused to limn them, though most assuredly they be "principal fauna." And I do suspect they are as dear to their Creator as any other creature.

Some other planters would eat the rats—oh, assuredly not when friends came to dine, but for a family dinner. Why not? The creatures have fed on sugar; their flesh is sweet. And as they eat so much of our crop, to eat them in turn is a sensible economy. Yet our Monsieur forebore this dainty for himself and his; the old mistress—the first one, the haughty and pious—sent the slave-children into the fields, to hunt and catch the rats, that at very little cost to the whites we slaves might daily dine on flesh, and so keep up our strength, without our sweat smelling fishy, or any expense for pork or beef. At the same time, we would help to save the crop.

This scheme fermented among us great bubbles of resent-

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ment—we to eat what the whites refuse as unfit? Our people left the vermin corpses for pigs, preferring to feed our strength with fish leaping fresh to the net, the gift of death to life, and so much the better if our sweat stank. Come Mardi Gras we hung that mistress in effigy, her figure sewed of sacking stuff, with a block of wood for a missal in her paw. This straw mistress we roasted above our bonfire. When she burned, she gave out a satisfying, piteous plaint, for we had filled her body with rats and mice.

No more than pilfering vermin or invading insects were we slaves to be discovered in M'sieu's chaste pencil-and-chalks or his fastidious ink-washes, unless we be those dim, tiny, bent figures seen from afar in rippling fields of cane. Front and center the feathered creatures, most especially those of a gaudy and brilliant plumage and distinguished profile, with warrior's crest and aquiline beak. Dearer to Pierre the drab pelican, its beak a belly of fish, and after the pelican, among featherless creatures, the crab that skulked in the brush, till, spying an enshelled slime shuck off his outgrown house, Sergeant Crab nipped in to occupy. How quaint to see patrolling crabs reconnoiter tunnelish paths through the brush, a rag-tag army in purloined uniforms. Were these the army of maroons, the runaway slaves the grown-ups spoke of in whispers?

In time the habits of pirate crabs seemed no less strange than the CHARACTER OF M'SIEU himself. For though he deemed himself a well-bred man, he observed no niceties of deportment or dress. Indeed, by the time he threw me his breeches, they were out at the knee, his coat tattered streamers, so I would rather get my clothes, of lesser stuff, from the captain of the drivers, Master Squint, of whom more later. But as for M'sieu, he forgot to close up his fall when he pissed. When his servant was slow, and he took a fit of pique and dressed himself, he rolled one stocking over his breeches, buckled his cuff over the other. He consistently forgot to wind the watch he carried on a chain and ignored the beating of the dinner gong.

When his brother's agents came from France, he bade me

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shave his head, though I had not the knack of the razor and nicked him more than once. He would not pay a barber, you see. Yet over his wounds, his full-bottom snugged his head most accommodating, so he might have cut a good figure had he not dragged from his fraying cuff a huge nasty rag to wipe his nose after pinching snuff. And those come from France remarked, he had lost the habit of bowing, though surely he must have had it once.

He never took a man's hand nor kissed a lady's, but only nodded absently when presented—did I say "kiss a lady"? When sober, he fondled neither maids nor men and eschewed intrigues, though when he had drunk himself sodden amidst a crush of planters he indulged in the jovial pinch. And now and then took a woman without ceremony, as a dog smelling rut, and so had fathered a brat or two in the yard.

His visitors returned to France, his wig gathered dust on a stand, the hair of his head pushed in tufts around his bald pate, like the tonsure of a depraved monk, so devilish wild he must wear his nightcap even on the steamiest nights so as not to fright the maids. Yet there were worse.

Had he kept his counsel, he might have been a tolerable master, save he exacted from those he lorded it over punctilios he himself foreswore. Madame, his second young wife—the first had died in a fluxy sweat—he bade dress and speak as a queen, though she minced through the pantry fearful of scorpions. Badgering the maids to scrape the mold off hanging meat, she must wear three sleeve flounces, and a sack, and a useless apron of lace, and a pinner with trailing lappets. She must be rouged and powdered, and patched and plucked, and teeter on high heels, her head dressed out with false curls. She must embroider perfect lilies on the household linens and read the scriptures every day as befitted a lady who, though born in these islands, had been schooled in a convent in France. Monsieur flew into fits of pique did he catch her with her sleeves rolled, calling her "Rogue" and lambasting her as a slavey.

POOR MADAME! She struck false notes on the pianoforte, the keys of which the air's moistness had swollen from tune.

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Her thread often tangled as she passed and repassed her needle. M'sieu then pined for a wife who knew what to do with the keys at her waist. Indeed children tittered in their sleeves as she passed with her nose in the air. And though she could crack those keys on a servant's skull, the smell of meat that had hung too long could not be masked with spice and wine. Yet again the bread was not too stale for willful jaw to crack! It is true that stuffing poked from the chairs, but M'sieu himself had scored the silk with the rowels of his spurs, neglecting to call for his boots taken off.

If M'sieu's wife were buffeted by his fits of discontent, consider: his slaves were entirely at his mercy. Pierre who had been trained to catch a bird unharmed with his hands did marvel at his master's alternation between three states: the first, a profound, faithful and innocent regard for the animals he observed; the second, an absentminded, brisk accord with his fellow human beings, including myself; the third, a sudden and violent animosity toward all Creation, which consumed his bandy-legged, potbellied person and laid waste roundabout. Was the tyrant who snapped his quills and tore his paper the same who stood so still to lure a lizard the tomtits lit on his head? In his rages he caned me and whipped me, yet still I pitied him. For, though a slave, I did live within myself a free man, master; M'sieu the converse.

Yet HIS DRAWINGS were all control, more exact than Nature herself had been, so scrupulously did he render the shape of each lineament, each color shade or tint, each hillock and valley of musculature and quirk of physiognomy, so exactly did he capture the needle-prick stare of the hawk and the desperate trembling gaze of the mouse, for whose delicate and whiskery deliberations he forgave its resemblance to the loathed rat.

Yes, and the thorny brush, the bent of which reveals the wind; the smoke tree's haze of ground twigs; the monstrous hairy sour-sap fruit; the manchineel with its blistering milk, its horrible charmy apples—ah, First Woman!—the amaranth, center stalks a fountain of blood; the rocks and the stones, earth with its packings and crumblings, yes, so truly did M'sieu

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draw all these, so meticulously paint, with such accurately mix't colors, one might have thought him a devil, tempting poor sinners, take one hesitant, fateful step into the world of his creation, a world seeming purer than our own, in which each creature, nay each rock, turns always for inspection, if not its best side, then at least that side most expressing its essence.

The purity came from this effect: though Monsieur did limn the animals precisely in all proportions and attributes, he refused to draw the shadows that, contrasting with the dapple of light, revealed and covered them. Were I to judge from the plates in books, the rendering of shadow, velvet and dense or hazy and dim, does give to the painted world its appearance of movement, suggesting alternation of day and night, and hence the round of seasons, the progress through shift and transformation to death, and thence to life again, from which no man can escape. Yet in the works of M'sieu, Creation is suffused in a pure, bright, even light, as if all creatures were light-struck cripples, caught in the terrible stillness before the palsy strikes, the storm breaks, the lava flows, caught in this moment as in Eternity, not the eternity of paradise, earned by the good, but a terrible stasis, the paralysis of Sun's merciless glare. Ah, what be any man but damned who casts no shadow? Shadow, shadow, the dark blot of being, stain of the blood waters, deep and heavy and old, mark of suffering, God's fiery tears, trail of ashes drenching our bones. He who casts no shadow, is he not unquiet in quiet forever, dead in life and live in death? Here is the paradox of the art of Dufay. Yet this be heady stuff, this paradox, argued in a vacuum tube, in the hand of Baron Skull, with the mercury long since run out.

In one other more mundane particular the art of M'sieu lacks verisimilitude: in the vine-swagged jungles that climb the mountainsides; in the groves of mango and orange trees, flaunting their gauds of fruit; among the tidy coffee trees; the cutlass-leaved bananas; the feathery palms; deep in the cane carries' green and landlocked sea, the island of St. Michel where abides Pierre be festooned with a florid plant called *orchid*, which displays itself in sun and shade, windward and

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leeward, high and low. M'sieu would not draw the brown-bagged blossoms, and cursed and stamped if he found but a grain of the pollen on his sleeve, calling for me to brush from him the stinking fish-hole crumbs. AH! If Buffon had come out from France, he would have seen in what respects his natural history of these islands be incomplete. Yet many an artful work was sent to France for engraving, and Pierre vaunted himself, he served a worthwhile master, though sorely the master tried his servant.

Those of HIS FINISHED WORKS M'sieu cherished too greatly to send forth, he locked in his old campaign chest, with several tattered standards and a sword he had worn in battles with Protestants before he came out to the Anduves. There in his chest he supposed his *oeuvre* would be safe from theft or spite or the depradations of rats or of armies. Alas! The chest was not close-fitted. In the leathern interior damp took hold and bred up slimes to soften the paper, spoil the colors and blur the exact outlines of the images. This I discovered one evening in a damp season when the company sat till midnight smoking pipes and drinking toasts from a bowl of fired brandy. Forsooth, I was ashamed to see M'sieu debauch himself among idlers. To cool the rebellious heat that rose in my head with the fumes of the burnt brandy the dissipates imbibed, I ventured into the keeping room to pick the lock of the campaign chest, as oft I did, for the sole purpose of examining, however furtively and briefly, the pictures and notes stored within, to renew my sense of my master's worth.

And what a putrefaction did I spy and smell! From the pigments on his pages there bloomed a terrible colony of proliferating, stunted monsters, regiments of blue and green and white spoilers, obliterating the limpid symmetries of M'sieu's vision, as if creatures of shadow and orchid-dust mites, obscure vermin and hermaphrodite flora-fauna he had refused to draw, had vengefully mingled their juices and their rage, and given birth to generations of vileness so wicked their stench was worse than death. All was rotting, beyond rotting, and would soon be lost altogether, as I pray my own pages, in their careful confinement, will not. And indeed, I did not like to think

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what life might fly from his trunk into the world, a greater plague than Pandora set free, and without any mitigating hope.

To stifle the slimy creatures, I hastily doused the oeuvre in a dusty particulate reserved for the wigs, which did whiten those heads and smother nits and might, the Gods be willing, sweeten the moldering pages in the chest. This good powder did possess a most pleasing scent, mixed of many magical essences of the several flowers of France, compounded with musk and orris root. It did indeed seem to stifle the odor like rancid cheese and stale piss that soured the chest. Yet before the slimes could flee the carnage, PIERRE relocked the chest. He sat by it then, guarding against any seepage from under the lid. And he listened for the master's call.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Laurel Anne Berger is a graduate student in the creative writing program at New York University. "The Storks" is her first published story.
Rhidian Brook's first novel, *The Testimony of Taliesin Jones*, was recently published in the United Kingdom. He lives in London.
Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1993. "Help Me Find My Spaceman Lover" is part of *Tabloid Dreams*, a forthcoming book of short stories that will appear as a television series on HBO this winter.
Patricia Eakins is the author of *The Hungry Girls and Other Stories*. She teaches in the writing program at the New School and lives in New York City.
Richard Stern is the author of *A Sistermony*, which received the Heartland Prize for nonfiction in 1995. *Pacific Tremors*, a novel, will be published this winter. He teaches English at the University of Chicago.

POETRY

Sarah Arvio's poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Yale Review* and other magazines. She lives in New York City.
Frank Bidart received the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1995. He is finishing a volume of poetry titled *Desire*.

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Scott Cairns directs the MFA program in creative writing at Old Dominion University. *Figures for the Ghost* is his most recent collection of poems.
Alfred Corn teaches writing in the School of the Arts at Columbia University. His most recent volume of poetry is *Autobiographies*.
Irving Feldman, a MacArthur Fellow, is the author of *The Lives and Letters*, a volume of poetry. He teaches at the State University of New York at Buffalo.
Joseph Harrison teaches at Goucher College and the Johns Hopkins part-time graduate program in Washington, D.C. His poems, with commentary by Rachel Hadas, appeared in a recent issue of *The Boston Review*.
John Kinsella, a Young Australian Creative Fellow, has published eight books. *Lightning Tree*, a collection of poems, is due out at the end of the year.
Campbell McGrath is the author of *Capitalism*, *American Noise* and the forthcoming *Spring Comes to Chicago*. He lives in Miami Beach.
Joyce Carol Oates is the author, most recently, of *Will You Always Love Me?*, a collection of stories. Her sixth volume of poetry, *Tenderness*, will be published this winter.
Sharon Olds teaches in the graduate creative writing program at New York University and helps run the NYU writing workshop at Goldwater Hospital. Her fifth book, *The Wellspring*, was published last winter.
Kathleen Peirce, a Whiting Award recipient in 1994, is the author of *Mercy* and *Divided Touch, Divided Color*. She teaches in the MFA program at Southwest Texas State University.
J.S. Renau received an MFA from the University of Florida and lives in Gainesville.
Pattiann Rogers is the author of *Firekeeper: New and Selected Poems*. She lives in Castle Rock, Colorado.
Ira Sadoff's fifth volume of poetry, *Delirious: New and Selected Poems*, is due out next spring. He lives in Hallowell, Maine.
Robyn Selman's first book of poems, *Directions to My House*, was published last year. She lives in New York City.
Patricia Storace, a former poetry editor of *The Paris Review*, is the author of *Heredity*, a book of poems. Her book about modern Greece, *Dinner with Persephone*, was recently published.
Adriana Szymanska has published eight volumes of poetry, most recently *A Roadside Stone*. She lives in Warsaw. Her translator, **Ewa Hryniewicz-Yarbrough**, lives in Berkeley, California.

FEATURE

Bernard Cooper is the author of *Maps to Anywhere*, *A Year of Rhymes* and *Truth Serum*. His work is included in *The Best American Essays 1995*. He lives in Los Angeles.

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INTERVIEWS

Shusha Guppy (Amos Oz interview) is the London editor of *The Paris Review*.
Bonnie Lyons (Richard Ford interview) teaches English at the University of Texas at San Antonio. The manuscript page that accompanies the interview appears courtesy of the Richard Ford papers, Special Collections, Michigan State University Libraries.

ART

Louise Bourgeois was born in Paris, France in 1911 and lives in New York. Excerpts from *The View from the Bottom of the Well* are from a portfolio of nine etchings with a text by the artist, published by Peter Blum Editions.
Joy Kreves lives in Ewing, New Jersey.
Elena del Rivero is represented by the Sandra Gering Gallery. She lives in New York City.
Cindy Workman's art appears courtesy of Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

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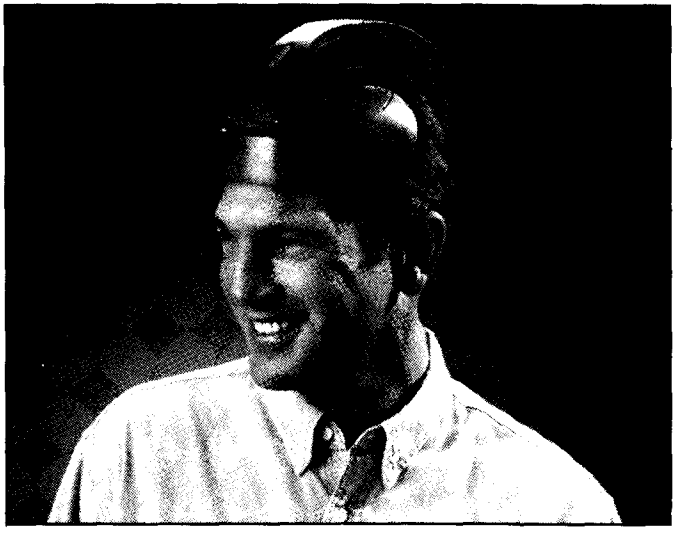

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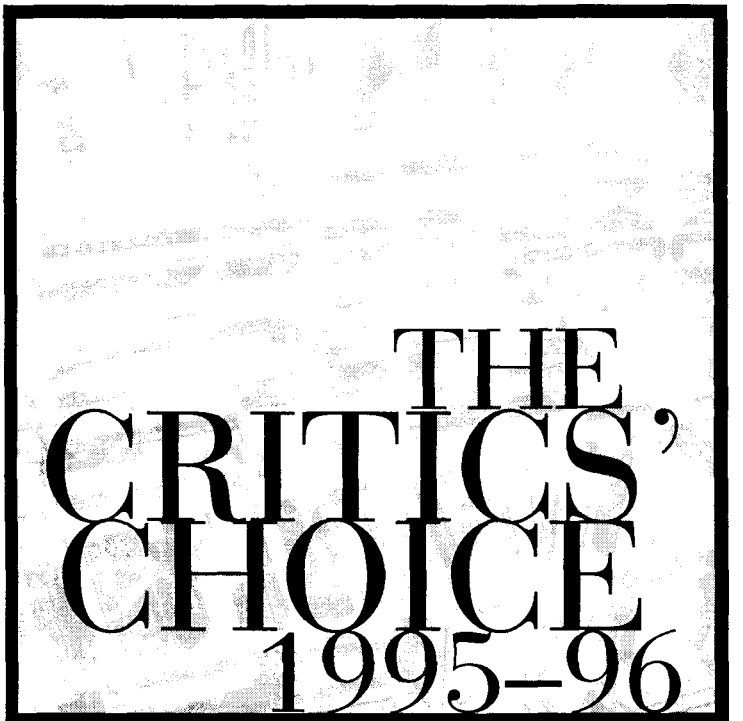

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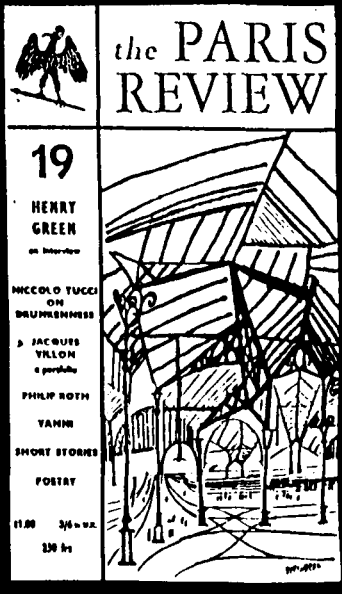

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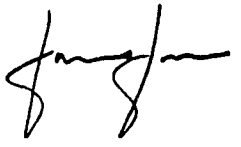

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